

The Logic of Emptiness

Books by Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö

The Logic of Emptiness

Gateway to the Vajrayana Path

Collected Notes 2012 -2018

The Four Seals of Dharma

The Handbook for Life's Journey

Are You Ready for Happiness?

The Right View

Daily Inspirations from Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö

The Logic of
Emptiness

*Understanding the
True Nature of Reality*

Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro Rinpoche

*Translated by
Dekyi Drolma and Lorraine Wu Chen*



LUMINOUS WISDOM SERIES

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Author's Preface

In this early 21st century, man has succeeded in building an advanced material civilization with hands and brains, and along the way managed to overcome many of life's challenges. However, the fundamental question regarding cyclic existence remains an enigma which modern science is still scrambling to understand. Great scientists like Newton, Einstein and other luminaries, all must succumb to the inevitable process going from life to death just like me and you, without exception. Science, as we know it today, is not the answer to our ultimate longing for absolute freedom from samsara.

This true liberation is beyond the cycle of birth, aging, sickness and death; it is where life rests, the natural state where every living being will eventually return. Those masters who had already attained this enlightened state conducted their lives with such contentment and equanimity, and carried themselves with tremendous dignity and grace until the very end. They experienced no suffering nor harbored any negative thoughts. Because once mind is free from all obscurations, external influences of the four elements (earth, water, fire and wind) cease as well. Only then can true freedom and happiness be had.

To realize this ultimate ideal, man's self-awareness and inherent wisdom must be explored and developed. As for the critical questions regarding the origin and the nature of cyclic existence, and the ways to go beyond its bounds, only the Dharma has the answers. For this reason, people from all walks of life really should familiarize themselves with Buddhist teachings somewhat. We believe that everyone can learn something valuable from it.

Chengdu, Sichuan, China

A Note about the Author

Venerable Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö Rinpoche, a native of Draggo (Ch: Luhuo) County in Sichuan Province, is Vice Principal of Sethar Larung Five Sciences Buddhist Institute (Larung Gar), also a renowned contemporary Nyingma teacher of Tibetan Buddhism and a strong advocate of Tibetan culture.

At the age of twenty-two (1984), he received ordination at Larung Gar, becoming a disciple of the great contemporary spiritual master, H.H. Khenchen Jigme Phuntsok. Over more than two decades, he applied himself diligently to the studies of both the Buddhist sutric and tantric scriptures and assimilated all contents without difficulty. After years of effort and consecutive levels of strict examinations, he was personally awarded the Khenpo degree by H.H. Khenchen Jigme Phuntsok. The results of his practice also were verified face-to-face three times by his root teacher. From 1991 to 2013, Khenrinpoche held the appointed position of Dean of Education at Larung Gar, responsible for the training of a large cohort of outstanding monastic students capable of carrying on the lineage and spreading the Buddhadharma.

In addition, Khenrinpoche has long dedicated efforts to promote the ideas of non-killing, life release of living beings, vegetarianism, environmental protection, and the importance of

education. His charitable endeavors include the establishment of libraries, nursing homes, and schools in the Tibetan regions. With a view to protecting and advancing the Tibetan spoken and written language, in 2005 Khenrinpoche invited language experts and scholars from Tibetan regions across five provinces to come together in compiling Chinese-Tibetan-English Dictionary of New Daily Vocabulary, while he himself assumed the role of the project's chief editor. The team has so far successfully published Chinese-Tibetan-English Dictionary of New Daily Vocabulary, Chinese-Tibetan-English Visual Dictionary of New Daily Vocabulary, and the Dictionary of Traditional Tibetan Words with Illustrations.

In recent years, Khenrinpoche has been invited to give lectures in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Canada, the USA, the UK, Australia and New Zealand, etc. His presentation is crisp and well organized, preferring to explain the profound in simple terms. Khenrinpoche is also good at referring to scientific examples and elucidating abstruse Buddhist doctrines using language that people today are familiar with, which is greatly appreciated by Buddhist followers and intellectuals alike.

Moreover, Khenrinpoche was invited as well for talks and scholarly discussions at prestigious academic institutions such as Harvard, Oxford, Stanford, UC Berkeley, Columbia, George Washington University, the University of Virginia, Toronto, Auckland, Sydney, and Melbourne, as well as at companies like Google, together with experts and scholars in the fields of science, philosophy, and psychology, discussing the mystery of life and the mind based on scientific and Buddhist principles.

Despite being an influential Buddhist master, Khenrinpoche is very modest and keeps a low profile, rarely draws attention to his own merit and spiritual attainment, instead focusing solely on the propagation of Dharma and ways to benefit sentient beings. His words and actions exemplify the ideal of a Mahayana practitioner, a real admirable teacher who braves all difficulties to uphold the beacon of true Dharma in this degenerate age. Khenrinpoche once wrote in his blog on Weibo, "My lama once told me that the only purpose and the value of our lives is to cultivate and to give love. I will not forget this in my whole life, hopefully nor in all future lives."

Khenrinpoche diligently applies himself to writing when any spare moment presents itself on his continuous journey to spread the Dharma. Among all of his publications, the Luminous Wisdom series is acclaimed as a masterpiece of Buddhism which can stand the test of time. Its contents encompass both theory and practice, with rigorous sequencing, and seamlessly integrate both sutra and tantra. The series is practical and appropriate, and the style of the language is concise, powerful, incisive, and thorough, meeting the psychological needs of a contemporary readership. As a result, it has become widely accepted and immensely popular. For the broad population of Buddhist students and practitioners, it provides a clear beacon to illuminate the way to liberation.

Publications to date:

Tibetan:

Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö's Complete Collection - Four Volumes; Rain in Time; Contemporary Beats of the Dharma Drum; Conversations Between Eastern and Western Cultures

Chinese:

Luminous Wisdom Series 1-10; Exhortations; Illuminating Insights (in Chinese/English); The Truth of Life; Buddhism – Superstition or Wisdom? Decipher the Mysterious Codes of Tibetan Buddhism; Unveil the Mysteries of Tibetan Buddhism; When Heart Sutra Meets Quantum Physics; Comprehending the Book Called Life; Deconstruct Vajrayana Buddhism; Collected Notes 2012-2018 (in Chinese/English)

English:

The Right View; Are You Ready for Happiness? – Don't Let the Paper Tiger Scare You Off; The Handbook for Life's Journey; Daily Inspiration from Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö; The Four Seals of Dharma; Collected Notes, 2012-2018; Gateway to the Vajrayana Path; The Logic of Emptiness

Translators' Note

In Buddhism, the Mahayana path is undertaken in stages: first, renunciation of the worldly pleasures and experiences that ultimately lead to suffering; second, cultivation of compassion and bodhicitta, the aspiration to awaken all sentient beings; third, knowledge, experience and realization of emptiness. Emptiness is the essence of Buddhist doctrine – the definitive teaching of the Buddha that completes the path to liberation.

The concept of emptiness can be difficult to comprehend because it negates the inherent existence of a self in person and in phenomena. Ordinary people have since beginningless time believed that the self exists, moreover, that all sentient beings, the world outside, etc. exist. This strong sense of self is firmly entrenched in us and hard to change. The key to fully apprehending and realizing emptiness is repetitive hearing, contemplation and practice. In the two major schools of Buddhism, Madhyamaka (Middle Way) and Yogacara (Mind Only), the basis for establishing the view of emptiness is logic; there are many methods of reasoning that help us uncover the true nature of reality. When we transform our way of thinking, we begin to sever not only our attachment to self but also afflictive hindrances like desire, anger and all cognitive hindrances which have bound us to the cycle of life and death in samsara.

The Logic of Emptiness is a compilation of many lectures given by Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro Rinpoche. The principal methods of reasoning that underlie emptiness are examined; the actual practice of emptiness is then explained. Included in the text are also Mipham Rinpoche's advice to beginners and his pith instructions on observing the mind. People who are familiar with Khenrinpoche's style will recognize the same sense of urgency and purpose in his teachings. As always, he brings great clarity to a difficult topic and explains the profound in simple terms so that it is readily understood.

We are most grateful to Rinpoche for making this book possible and for his guidance during the course of the translation. A special thanks also to Thinley Chodron for her very helpful suggestions in bringing the book to publication.

It is our sincere hope that all who read this English edition gain insight into the true nature of reality and, with this understanding, find genuine happiness and peace of mind.

Dekyi Drolma
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Taipei, Taiwan
May 2023

Seeing All External Objects as Phenomena of the Mind

In everyday life, whether the environment is perceived as mind itself or not is inconsequential. However, in mind training, it is critical that practitioners see all external objects as phenomena of the mind. This understanding can be established through the methods of reasoning below.

Overturning our mistaken view

All human beings come into the world with a certain view that is inherent at birth. This view is “self-attachment,” a kind of blind attachment that is totally unfounded. It is not conferred by our parents or by our teachers, but it is innate in all of us. Where does this attachment come from?

This attachment originates in “ignorance”; with ignorance, there is self-attachment. The transition from the luminous mind of the tathagata to afflictions is a process that is clearly elucidated in tantra, but less so in sutra. Generally speaking, the nature of all phenomena is luminosity (or clear light), but due to various circumstances, a very subtle thought is produced. This thought itself is an attachment – an attachment to self in phenomena which then leads to an attachment to self in person. With the attachment to oneself, desire, anger, delusion, and

other afflictions are produced. With afflictions, karma is created, both good and bad. With karma, the world of mountains, rivers, and vast expanses of land is formed. This is the process by which the external objects come into being.

From the perspective of an ordinary person, all things on the outside exist; these things that we can see, touch, and hear are very real. However, this is just our viewpoint. We need to overturn this view, perception and way of reasoning, also our habitual tendencies since beginningless time, including such things people deem to be really exceptional. If we do not make this effort, we will remain ordinary people forever bound to the cycle of life and death in samsara.

Many people nowadays think mankind is already very civilized, that there is much to be admired and envied in our way of life. But what is civilization? For human beings in samsara, this so-called “civilization” is no more than a relatively good way of survival. In fact, this way of survival is also rooted in ignorance. As soon as we dispel ignorance, we can overturn the perceptions ordinary people have. This thought produced from the luminous mind of the tathagata has progressed all along the path of cyclic existence; now with its dissolution, we can return to the original state of luminosity. This is truly returning to our original nature.

Many worry whether this means civilization is going backwards. Whether this runs counter to social development and human progress. Whether this violates the natural law. But what is the natural law?

The activities of the mind and body that constantly

preoccupy us are not the natural law. Why is that? They are all contrivances rooted in ignorance – a misapprehension. Actually, the Dharma teachings are precisely the tool to overturn these deep-rooted wrong views.

Thinking all religions are dogma, some people hold a strong bias against Buddhism and go so far as to deride it. Certainly, some religions fall in this category but not all. If proponents of either the Idealist or Realist school want their argument to be accepted but cannot provide evidence of any kind, that constitutes dogma. It is not possible to overturn a viewpoint with dogma. To overturn any view, we must use methods based on logical reasoning that everyone can accept. There are many different methods in Buddhism, such as the logic in Madhyamaka (Middle Way) and Yogacara (Mind Only) ; the common goal of all these methods is to eradicate our deluded view.

Our sense perceptions are not reliable

The first thing to refute as truly existent is the external objects perceived through our eyes.

All external objects are phenomena of the mind; this is one aspect of the view held by the Yogacara True Aspectarians. One may question the validity of such a statement: if the external objects, such as mountains and rivers, buildings, these tables and chairs included, are outside, and our mind is inside the body, how can external objects and mind – two entirely unrelated entities – be one and the same? Regarding this question, let us see if we can first set aside our habitual way of thinking, be objective and examine how we come to the conclusion that external objects exist. A lot of people simply assume that

because we can see the color and shape of things, hear sounds, and touch objects hard and soft, the external objects must be real.

This kind of logic is prevalent, not just among a few people, but among mankind as a whole. Moreover, the particle accelerator, electron microscope and other such instruments have further substantiated our belief in the existence of the external objects by making it possible for us to see even more particles we believe to be real.

Have we ever considered, however, it is by way of our eyes that measurements using the particle accelerator, electron microscope and other instruments are made? A microscope has been added, but ultimately it is still the eyes that confirm the findings. If the eyes do not actually perceive objects outside, what can the microscope really tell us or validate? Along the same line of reasoning, the sounds we hear, and the notion of right and wrong, good and bad, existence and non-existence all come from our sense organs, but how reliable are these faculties?

The Buddha expounded early on that our five sense organs are not reliable; although on the surface they can sense the existence of objects, this kind of feeling is just an illusion. To see a thing clearly, we cannot go by its appearance alone. For example, if we want to do a careful check on a car, we need to take apart all its components, then examine the parts individually. In so doing, we will find the original car has disappeared in our hands and cannot be found. If the car truly exists, it cannot disappear. This testifies to its lack of inherent nature. Why do we always persist in thinking external objects

exist? Because we have complete faith in our five sense organs; we think things are real if they can be seen and heard, without ever investigating the logic behind it. Because we hold on to a very simplistic view, our five senses have deceived us since beginningless time. It is only upon careful analysis that we discover the things we see and hear ordinarily are but an illusion.

Cause and result are falsely established

Most people believe cause and result truly exist. What is the connection between cause and result? For example, when we build a fire, there is smoke. Fire is the cause, smoke the result. With fire, smoke will arise; without fire, smoke will not arise.

In the example of a seed and sprout, the seed is the cause, the sprout is the result. We all believe in this causal relationship. But can we confirm they are connected in this way?

In the first instance, we will definitely say they are cause and result. Let us now take a closer look at the nature of that connection.

Most of us say the seed and sprout exist at the same time. The sprout can arise from the seed for this reason. Just as when the hand touches an object, contact is possible only when both exist at the same time. This is a common view. But it is logically untenable upon examination.

If cause and result occur simultaneously, it would imply the result is there already at the time of the cause. Of what use is the cause then? The specific function of a cause is to produce a result which does not yet exist. If cause and result exist at the same time, the result does not depend on the cause for its

production since the result exists already; thus the existence of the cause is meaningless. In the same way, there is no causality between the left hand and the right hand; the hands exist at the same time, so one does not produce the other.

Another viewpoint asserts: cause is the first instant, result is the second instant; cause and result occur sequentially. The cause exists first, the result is produced thereafter. This interpretation seems more reasonable, and is accepted by a lot of people. However, on closer examination, it is still inaccurate.

When the cause exists, does the result also exist? If the result also exists, it is the same view stated before. If, however, the result does not exist, how is the result produced from the cause? This is a question we need to investigate.

For instance, when the seed exists but the sprout does not, where is the sprout at the time of the seed? It cannot be found anywhere; it does not exist because it has not been produced yet. How then does the sprout arise from the seed? There is no way to answer that, even if we rely on different instruments. Everyone knows a sprout arises when a seed is given the proper conditions, such as soil, temperature and moisture. Originally, there is no trace of a sprout either within or outside the seed, but with the right conditions, the sprout appears. Where does it come from? After this analysis, a lot of people must think: the sprout comes from the seed. But as we have just explained, at the time of the seed, there is no sprout, so how does the sprout appear? If two objects exist simultaneously, one object can affect the other and cause it to change; however, if one of the objects does not even exist, how can it produce a change in the other? It is not possible. That being the case, how does it come

into being? In Buddhism, this is said to be “dependent arising.” In fact, on careful examination, we will discover cause and result cannot communicate at all.

Take the example of a father and son, the father dies before the child is born; after the child is born, one is alive, the other dead. There is no way they can communicate with each other, but we acknowledge they are father and son. This is a relatively coarse perception that our eyes can see, so everyone recognizes the relationship. Similarly, in the microscopic world that our eyes cannot see, these kinds of appearances are everywhere. Without valid reason or basis, a result is produced – this is called dependent arising. All phenomena arise or come into existence depending on causes and conditions. When causes and conditions come together, a different object is produced. From our perspective, the object that comes after is produced by the object before it, but this view cannot be substantiated.

Perhaps some people believe there are methods in science. The fact is science cannot validate these appearances either because of its own limitation. We know, in the microscopic world, with the breakdown of matter into ever smaller particles, the explanation given by science is increasingly ambiguous. At present, quantum mechanics is the most advanced theory in physics, but doubt remains whether its logic is absolute. The achievements of many scientists, like Newton and Einstein, were widely regarded to be the highest point in science during their time; even these have been overturned one by one. Actually, this is all clearly elucidated in the early Buddhist texts, specifically in Nagarjuna’s exposition of emptiness and dependently arisen phenomena. The Yogacara tenets postulate that cause and result is a phenomenon brought about by the

orderly ripening of a seed in the alaya consciousness; it is not an entity that exists outside.

All external objects are a manifestation of our mind

Many people cannot comprehend how external objects can be our mind. Take these flowers for example: clearly they were first grown, then sold by the vendors to us; how can they be our mind? If the flowers were our mind, why would we need to pay for them? What about the money and the vendors?

There is really no difference between the events that happen in the daytime and in our dreams; they are all phenomena of our mind. In the dream, we still have to climb the stairs one step at a time; we still have to buy a ticket to get on the plane; we still have to pay for the flowers, unless in the dream they are stolen. All that happens to us in the daytime can also happen in our dream; as long as the dream continues, there is no difference between the two.

A person may ask: the world our eyes can see is outside, our mind is inside the body. How can these two entities be one? The best evidence we have is from our sense organs, but this is exactly where our problem lies. What does it mean to say the eyes can see? Most people will say it means the eyes can see the object itself; actually, our eyes only have a sense of the object they are looking at. What is a sensation? Sensations and feelings are the uncommon function of the mind. Apart from the mind, a physical object does not have this function. A blind person does not have this sensation, so he or she cannot see; a normal person has this sensation, so he or she can see. Similarly with the ear, our ear consciousness has a sensation that allows us to

hear sounds; a person who is deaf does not have this sensation and cannot hear anything. If we lose our five organs, we also lose the five kinds of consciousness, at which point we will discover nothing exists.

When we see a flower, we sense the flower is outside and our eye consciousness is inside; however, this is the perception of the mental or sixth consciousness, not the eye consciousness. What is eye consciousness? For instance, at the time we see an object, that “seeing” is in itself eye consciousness. There is no other eye consciousness besides this. Perhaps someone thinks eye consciousness is likened to light, which shines on a certain object and allows it to be seen. This is not the case. When an object appears before our eyes, eye consciousness is that which sees it instantly in its entirety, i.e., has a sense of the object.

Many people think our mind is the mental consciousness. In Yogacara, the mind is composed of eight kinds of consciousness – the five kinds of sense consciousness, the sixth mental consciousness, the seventh manas (defiled) consciousness and the eighth alaya consciousness. The alaya consciousness is the base or ground of all consciousness. So, our mind is not just the mental consciousness.

As for the view that “mind is inside, objects are outside,” this is the perception of the mental consciousness. For instance, when our hand comes into contact with fire, it is very hot to the touch, but what is this thing called hot? It is also a kind of sensation. In addition, when our hand touches an object, most of us think there must be such an object out there. If not, how can we possibly touch it? Most people are of this opinion, but it is mistaken. We can cite numerous examples to refute this perception.

For example, everyone thinks these mala beads are round, but on what basis do we say they are round? Actually our eyes can only see one side of the bead; like looking at a photo, we can only see the front, not the back. However, if we touch the bead with our thumb and middle finger, we can touch both the front and the back and say it is round. Our thumb has a sensation, our middle finger also has a sensation. The two sensations combined produce a feeling that it is round. Nonetheless, these are two sensations, not one. It is our mind that pulls all the information together and concludes the bead is round; it is the mind's perception and finding. This is a misapprehension. Without investigation, we also accept the conclusion it is round; however, upon examination, we begin to question how we can be certain it is round. We will never know for sure since this feeling is specific to our sense faculty and mind. Most people think these sensations can be traced to an object. But who can prove they are based on a truly existent object outside? It can never be proven.

Whether an object is square or round, it is first by way of our eyes that we see it. Initially, we see the color and shape of the object; then as the hand comes in contact with it, we believe the object is square or round, and conclude it exists objectively. However, the perceptions that come by way of the eye and hand cannot be trusted. Since the sensations of the eye and hand are basically unreal, the findings based on this foundation are also unreal.

In Yogacara, there are two subschools: the True Aspectarians and the False Aspectarians. The True Aspectarians have a common view and an uncommon view. The common view accepts the existence of matter; it is the uncommon view

that most people find difficult to comprehend – that is, when we see an object, we only see the surface, not the object itself. For instance, when a person sees someone with clothes on, he or she does not see the skin, muscles and bones under the clothes; from the person's perspective at the moment, they do not exist. To the vast majority, this is illogical. Clearly, one can see the skin and muscles when the clothes are removed, or when a body is dissected into its many parts. On this point, most people are of the same opinion. However, this view has already been overturned in Yogacara.

For instance, in a dream, a cow is slaughtered; when the skin is removed, we see all of its parts – blood, muscles and bones, as clearly as we would see them in the daytime. But no one will believe the muscles, bones and inner organs in the dream are real. If we think the dream is not real, we should think the circumstances in the daytime are no different. Why is it we cling to our existence in samsara, but not to the experience in a dream?

Because a dream is very short. Upon waking up, we quickly come to the realization that the circumstances in the dream are unreal and do not exist. In contrast, samsara lasts a long time, the end is not yet in sight. When the bodhisattvas, who were once ordinary people, attain the first bhumi, it is like waking up from a dream; they instantly realize all is an illusion, like a dream. Why is it we do not have this capability? The reason is we are still dreaming. In the dream, we cannot discern what is real or unreal, so we continue to grasp and cling to worldly existence.

This is the view held by relatively advanced practitioners among the Yogacara True Aspectarians. In their encounter with ordinary people, however, they do not make this assertion since it cannot be comprehended by most. They acknowledge the existence of other sentient beings (so it is not Solipsism). In a group of one hundred people all looking at the moon at the same time, each will see the moon differently. But those with common karma will all have the same feeling and believe they are looking at the same moon. If one person closes his or her eyes, leaves the group or dies, that person's perception disappears, but all others will still think the moon exists. The logic employed in the True Aspectarian view is very complete and has yet been refuted.

There are other examples that further support our view. If fire is a substantive thing that is very hot to the touch, any person or living being should upon contact have the same sensation. But in fact that is not the case. According to sutra, there is one species of rodents that consumes fire and also lives inside the fire. Many other beings also live inside the fire. Or, for example, if we swap the natural habitat of a tropical fish and any fish in general, neither will survive – one will die from the cold, the other from heat. These examples tell us: there is basically nothing called “hot” or “not hot” that exists in and of itself; whether something is hot or not depends entirely on each one's own perception.

Some scientists have already shown that certain aquatic animals exist in the ocean at the crater of a volcano where the temperature is 200C. Imagine mankind engaged in a debate with the fish that occupy these waters. A human would say water at 100C is extremely hot, but the fish would say water at 100C is

not hot at all; a human would say that which is called “hot” is his or her own sensation; the fish would also say that which is called “not hot” is its own sensation. Who is right? From the standpoint of mankind, the human is correct because human beings have the same feeling; however, if the fish were to judge, the answer would be different.

In the absence of a conclusion, one can only say for the time being they are both correct. The fish is correct from its standpoint; the human is correct from a human standpoint. Why is that? If the fish left its 200C habitat for warm water, it would freeze to death; if a human being stepped into the 200C water, the human would undoubtedly burn to death. The two sides would never be able to compromise or reach a consensus. This clearly confirms all phenomena are merely our own reflection; they do not exist objectively. If things truly exist, that thing called hot should stay hot forever, that thing called cold should stay cold forever; it should not depend on the sensation of different sentient beings. People who do not understand this logic can cite numerous explanations for the appearance of things, all of which in the end will be refuted. This is because their viewpoint can never escape the domain of ignorance.

In *Beacon of Certainty*, it is also said: a bowl of water to a human being is just a bowl of water; to the sentient beings in hell, it is molten lava; to the hungry ghosts, it is pus; to the heavenly beings, it is nectar; to the bodhisattvas at the eighth ground, it is pure land; to the buddhas, it is dharmadhatu. If we invite the sentient beings of the five realms, and the buddhas and bodhisattvas to look at the same bowl of water simultaneously, they will arrive at different conclusions. They will all maintain different points of view. Which of the views

at these seven levels is correct? Certainly that of the buddha, who has absolute wisdom and is completely free of defilements. From this, we can see even more clearly why the so-called world outside is an illusion. Rongzom Pandita and other great scholars of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism placed particular emphasis on this way of reasoning. In expounding the pure perception of Dzogchen, or Great Perfection, this was the method they used.

***Mind and its surroundings are in accord
when emptiness is realized***

Practitioners who have realized emptiness can, on entering the state of emptiness, step on a stone as if on clay and leave behind clear footprints. However, prior to realizing emptiness, they are like ordinary people; the stone under the feet feels just as hard.

There is this description in Khenpo Ngachung's biography: once when he was waving the vajra and bell, he carelessly dropped them on a stone. When they landed, the stone suddenly became as soft as butter. The vajra and bell formed a clear impression on the stone; an image of the stone was also clearly etched on the vajra and bell. In many monasteries in Tibet, a lot of masters left behind similar footprints and handprints.

However, we should point out not all footprints are traced to highly accomplished practitioners. There are non-Buddhist methods that can also bring about the same result. It is said when a certain animal oil is applied to the hand, grabbing a stone is like grabbing a handful of clay. So we should not readily assume anyone with this ability is a highly accomplished

practitioner. These appearances do not necessarily testify to the person's realization, but they can further confirm that phenomena are a projection of the mind. If the external world and mind are separate, practitioners would not be able to leave behind footprints and handprints.

In Milarepa's biography, there is this story: once Milarepa and a student of logic engaged in a heated debate. The opposite side asked, "Are there obstructions in space?" Milarepa replied, "Certainly there are obstructions in space." Just when his opponent thought he had the advantage, Milarepa unexpectedly flew into space and proceeded to walk and stand in the sky, as though on land. The opposite side again asked, "Does the rock have obstructions?" Milarepa answered, "The rock does not have obstructions." To prove his point, Milarepa passed through the rock at will, rendering everyone quite speechless. This amply demonstrates our viewpoint that external objects and mind are of the same essence; when the mind is at ease, the external world manifests accordingly.

Perhaps many people think these are all myths – they are not to be believed. But consider this: a myth is something that people believe fundamentally does not exist or cannot possibly exist. The reason a lot of people do not think it exists is because they were not there to see it with their own eyes. But is that proof it does not exist? If this line of reasoning were established, many of the viewpoints we have today would all be refuted immediately. For example, if we had tried to talk to ordinary people about spaceships, computers, etc. a thousand years ago, they would definitely have thought all that is nonsense. In the same way, when we talk about the workings of our inner world, a lot of people nowadays also reject it. It

is not a common experience, since the vast majority of people have not yet developed their mind. Be that as it may, there are people who have already developed their mind and attained realization. Therefore, this viewpoint can withstand analysis and is absolutely true.

In tantra, for instance, everything is the mandala of the buddha. Some beginners on the tantric path will question or doubt this assertion (although not out loud for fear of breaking the tantric vows). If I am a buddha already, why do I need to cultivate my mind? Although this is true, we need to undergo practice and tame the mind before a state of realization can manifest. Why is that? Because all phenomena are a projection of the mind; when we succeed in taming the mind after diligently staying on the path of practice, we can also affect the world around us. This is likened to watching a slide; the images we see on the screen are a projection of the slides in the projector. In the same way, the external objects that we see are reflections of the habitual tendencies and seeds stored in our mind. Once our mind is pure, all external objects are also pure, we will no longer transmigrate in the cycle of existence.

These viewpoints are the direct realization of countless practitioners. Actually, as long as we work hard at cultivating our innate wisdom, we can all enter this state of realization and comprehend the true nature of reality. The Buddha proclaimed everyone has this ability; it is not the domain of heavenly beings only. If we diligently follow the teachings of the Buddha, we can attain blessings in life and rebirth in Pure Land; we can also actualize buddhahood in this lifetime.

Practice is essential to attaining liberation

If you are extremely attached to the circumstances in a dream, then stay in the dream, do not wake up. Similarly, if you cling to existence in samsara, then stay attached to the things around you, do not reflect on their inherent nature. But you would only be fooling yourself! If you are dissatisfied with your current situation and wish to take a closer look, you may upon investigation become increasingly disappointed with the external world, and gradually lose trust in your own eyes and ears. It is not that the Buddha wanted us to distrust our senses, rather it is that we cannot find reason to believe in our senses. With evidence, we can believe; without evidence, we cannot believe; if without evidence we also believe, that is ignorance!

Human beings have very diverse capacities, so their goal in life is also diverse. Some are content to just meet their basic needs; some chase after happiness; some are not content with pursuing sensual pleasures and want to look into life's ultimate meaning. If our only aspiration in life is to satisfy our basic needs, we are no different from ordinary animals. We should have wisdom, which is the biggest difference between a human being and other animals; wisdom is also the special advantage we humans have. To bring this advantage into full play, we have to perceive the world clearly and know our true purpose in life. When we see the truth, we may feel let down by our old ways of perceiving things; however, this disappointment is very different from other kinds of disappointment. This is realization of emptiness. It is a very important step.

To realize emptiness, we must first have the right understanding: all things are phenomena of the mind; moreover,

the mind is inherently empty. Regarding this understanding, there are also many levels, the highest of which is Dzogchen. It is the view in tantra and the third turning of the wheel of Dharma that all worldly phenomena are an illusion and that mind is clear light in essence. This understanding is extremely important.

Although a small part of the view held by the Yogacara True Aspectarians and that set forth by the empirical idealist George Berkeley appear similar in some places, Buddhism is neither Idealism nor Realism, neither philosophy nor science, it is beyond all these. Nonetheless, it does contain many elements of Idealism, Realism, philosophy and science. Buddhism has explanations for many of the problems Western philosophers do not have an answer for; everyone can refer to and study *Commentary on Valid Cognition* and Mipham Rinpoche's commentary on the text. The teachings of the Buddha can withstand analysis; moreover, the further we examine its standpoint, the greater is our certainty that all phenomena are created by the mind.

Of course, not everyone has to come to this realization; the True Aspectarians do not represent all of Dharma either. Fundamentally, Buddhism is likened to a supermarket that can offer products to meet the needs of different people. If this viewpoint does not appeal to you, you can set it aside for the time being and choose another method of liberation, but you can never overturn it. Just as certain drugs are effective in treating different ailments, they can also have the opposite effect on some people. If we cannot accept the view on emptiness, we can start with understanding cause and result, doing good not evil, and generating renunciation and bodhicitta. All tall

structures are built from the ground up. The Buddha gave us eighty-four thousand methods, each of which can directly or indirectly lead us to liberation; the key is whether we have the resolve to stay on the path.

Many beginners on the Buddhist path seem to have strong faith and a revulsion toward worldly things; however, this quickly dissipates after a few years. The problem is not with the teachings; without the teachings, the actual accomplishments of the great masters, of which there were many in history, would not have been possible. The fault lies entirely with not putting the teachings into practice. Liberation cannot be attained just by securing the blessings of a living buddha, receiving a special empowerment, acquiring a Dharma name or cultivating virtuous affinities.

The Dharma places emphasis on the unity of knowing and practice, the importance of understanding and practice. To attain liberation, we must practice. In the absence of practice, our ignorance will not dissolve on its own; we will continue to follow our karma and wander in the cycle of existence. Sometimes it is darkness, sometimes it is a bit of light; eighty to ninety percent of the time it is darkness, the rest of the time it is light; within the light, there is also darkness. So, light in the cyclic existence is extremely rare. If we choose to remain infatuated with worldly existence and ignore the truth, we can only expect to go on indefinitely like this.

The Madhyamaka View of Emptiness

The nine yanas of the path

In the Nyingma literature, “nine yanas” or vehicles on the path of Dharma are mentioned. In most sutras, only “two yanas” are mentioned – Mahayana (Great Vehicle) and Hinayana (Lesser Vehicle). Additionally, in some treatises and in tantra, “five yanas” are taught. Of course, there are also countless other ways in which the Dharma is explained. These classifications emerged because of the need to give different levels of teachings to sentient beings in accordance with their individual capacity.

The concept of “nine yanas” is introduced below:

In “nine yanas,” the nine stages from Shrivakayana to Dzogchen are all considered non-secular vehicles to liberation; not included is the human-celestial yana.

The human-celestial yana is mentioned in the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*. In this vehicle, the fundamental belief in cyclic existence and karma, the law of cause and result, leads a person to take up virtuous deeds and abandon non-virtuous deeds. Due to virtuous roots, blessings are created that allow the person to be reborn in the human and celestial realms. The human-celestial yana is also called a secular vehicle. At a higher level are the

non-secular vehicles, which from sutra to tantra can be divided into nine stages:

1. Shravakayana (Hinayana)
2. Pratyekabuddhayana (Hinayana)
3. Bodhisattvayana (Mahayana – Sutra)(Yogacara, Madhyamaka and higher schools)
4. Kriya Tantra (Mahayana – Outer Tantra)
5. Charya Tantra (Mahayana – Outer Tantra)
6. Yoga Tantra (Mahayana – Outer Tantra)
7. Maha Yoga (Mahayana – Inner Tantra)(Development stage practice)
8. Anu Yoga (Mahayana – Inner Tantra)(Completion stage practice)
9. Ati Yoga (Mahayana–Inner Tantra)(Dzogchen)

The human-celestial yana is the lowest level. Shravakayana, the next level above, takes the fundamental view in the human-celestial yana one step further. It also believes in cause and result and the cycle of life and death, but rejects the notion of a “self” which is asserted in the human-celestial yana. The view in Shravakayana and Pratyekabuddhayana is basically the same; Yogacara expands on this view but refutes certain aspects of it. For instance, Shravakayana claims there is no “self in person” but the four elements – earth, water, fire and wind – exist, so there is “self in phenomena.” Yogacara believes there is neither

“self in person” nor “self in phenomena.”

Apart from that, Yogacara asserts all phenomena are created by the mind, a position which Madhyamaka also holds. However, Madhyamaka denies the existence of the alaya consciousness. The view in Madhyamaka is higher than in Yogacara (here we refer specifically to the Yogacara view in the four schools of Buddhist philosophy, not to aspects of the view expounded in the *Lankavatara Sutra* and in other sutras). In the writings of Nagarjuna on Madhyamaka and those of Vasubhandu and Asanga on Yogacara, for example, the *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, *Twenty Verses on Consciousness Only*, and *Thirty Verses on Consciousness Only* (these texts are also in circulation in Chinese-speaking areas), it shows clearly the view in Madhyamaka is more profound than in Yogacara. The highest view, over and above Madhyamaka, is tantra. This is a progressive practice in which each of the nine yantras presents us with new ideas that uphold but also repudiate the previous view.

Of course, only academics in comparative religion have an interest in studying this at great length. We can also get a general overview, but that should not be our priority. As Buddhists, we must have the right view: an accurate understanding of the cycle of life and death, the universe, human life and all worldly phenomena and matter; at the very least, we should comprehend the true nature of reality. This is the basis of liberation; even in the absence of realization, this understanding is essential.

Establishing no-self

Firstly, we need to ask ourselves: what are the things with which we come into contact twenty-four hours a day? All of us arrive

into this world with a view that is inherent at birth; this view is not reliant on external circumstances or guidance from others; in Buddhism, it is called “innate self-attachment.” It is “innate” because it is not conferred by our parents or teachers, but inherent at birth. It is “self-attachment” because it clings from moment to moment to our own self-existence. Our lives revolve around the existence of this “self”; if this “self” does not exist, we would not have to do any of the things we now do for ourselves.

How then do we infer this “self” does not exist?

For example, if we want to check out a car, we can see on the outside a chassis and four wheels. To get a closer look, we can open the hood of the car and see the structure inside. For an even closer look, we can remove the parts and examine them. That way we are in a better position to say whether the car is in good condition. If we judge the car by its appearance alone, we can only establish the concept of a “four-wheel vehicle.”

Or if we want to examine a house, it appears on the outside only as a place someone can live in. To get a closer look, we need to know what kind of material is used in its construction. This requires that we conduct an inspection to determine whether it is a wood, stone, or steel and cement structure.

Therefore, to fully understand a thing, we must be able to go beyond the surface and explore its deeper meaning. In the same way, if we want to comprehend the self and phenomena, we need to investigate how things outside come into being, and how our mind is constructed. This understanding can only be established through thorough analysis.

The methodology is similar to that used to examine the car and house. However, we need to point out that in investigating the type of material used in constructing the house, whether stone or steel and concrete, most people are just content to see the structure of the house; there is no need to take a further look at the nature of that material. But from our perspective, it is essential.

In sutra we are taught how to reason. As an example, assume we have a piece of fabric; our eyes tell us it is a piece of fabric that can be made into clothing. But if we take the fabric apart, it becomes a pile of threads. Faced with this large pile of threads, where is the fabric we saw a moment ago? At this time, we should think: perhaps that piece of fabric never existed. Or perhaps the fabric was there but disappeared after it was taken apart. If we think the fabric never really existed, then “what is the material that we usually buy to make our clothes?” Or if we think the fabric was there but disappeared after it was torn up, then “where did it go?” We need to give serious thought to these questions. They are not an argument set forth by any particular school but a critical proposition.

We can continue to investigate the nature of the fabric as follows. After taking apart the fabric and examining it, we come to the conclusion: it is made of threads. If we then take one of these threads and take it apart, we reach the conclusion: it is made of even finer threads, silk or wool. Once again, where is the thread that was taken apart? Did it ever exist? If not, what is it that we saw before it was taken apart? What is the fabric composed of? If the thread was there but disappeared after it was taken apart, where did it go? This process by which an image appears then disappears – is it not like a rainbow, a dream, an illusion?

Let us now take a closer look at the pile of wool threads. If we are conducting the investigation with our eyes, a fine strand of wool is the limit. However, we can still cut up this strand of wool into many sections as tiny as dust particles. Each section can no longer be considered wool at this point. If we continue to divide these dust-like sections until they cannot be divided any further (i.e. empty), what is left? Please note the final result is most important. Can this minute dust particle be divided indefinitely? Or only up to a point? Some say it can be divided into the smallest dust particle but no further. Others say it can be divided indefinitely. We believe both viewpoints are incorrect. Who is to say the smallest dust particle cannot be further divided?

We know that the concept of six directions is east, south, west, north, up and down. Does a micro dust particle have six directions? The answer is most definitely yes. This implies there are six directions that are even more refined. The east direction has its own east, south, west, north, up and down; the east of the east direction also has its own east, south, west, north, up and down. It is the same with all six directions; they can all be divided again and again until the dust particle no longer exists.

Likewise, if a second can also be divided indefinitely, this second will last forever and never come to an end. A minute will be even longer, not to mention an hour; there will be no difference to us between day and night. From a secular standpoint, a second is an absolute concept; but in another space-time continuum, it is not exactly so. For instance, a dime consists of ten pennies which can be counted, starting with one penny and ending with ten pennies when all are used up. From the standpoint of time, an hour has sixty minutes, a minute has

sixty seconds, but a second contains a figure so large it cannot be described, just as the stars in the sky cannot be counted; thus, the second will not come to an end, not after a night, two nights or longer. We cannot use up the second, since it is endless and without limit. This second will remain a second forever. Like we are here together in this second; when you leave this place in a while, you will still be in this second – this much is certain; if at the time you leave, the second has ended, it can hardly be called endless. Therefore, if tomorrow is the same second as yesterday, the concept of time no longer exists.

Having thus examined time, let us go back to analyzing phenomena. One may ask about this watch in my hand: how many dust particles is it composed of? If the answer is infinite, what about a house? It is also composed of infinite dust particles. If both are made up of infinite dust particles, why do they appear so different in mass and weight? Please note the dust particle mentioned here is a unit of measurement; whether it is the house or watch we are referring to, the dust particle is the same unit. Just as a “gram” is a unit of mass; it is the common standard against which all things big or small are measured.

We know there is more mass in ten grains of rice than five grains of rice, because of the difference in quantity. Why then is the house so much bigger than the watch if they are similarly composed of infinite dust particles? Where does the difference in size come from? The rice that we eat should also have an infinite number of dust particles; if so, we will never be able to finish a bowl of rice. Some say our appetite is limitless; if our appetite is limitless, we will never be full but in fact that is not true. It is thus clear if we use an infinite number of dust

particles as a basis of measurement, a tiny strand of hair is the same as a house, since they both contain infinite dust particles. In that case, the mass and weight of the hair and the house cannot be established.

From a different angle, we can try to see objects as having a limit or boundary. Where is this “limit”? Take our previous example: the east still has east, south, west and north; the north still has east, south, west and north; if we keep dividing each of the directions like this, a limit which cannot be divided any further can only be established arbitrarily by our mind. In reality, every object has a boundary, so it gets smaller and smaller when divided until it reaches a dust-like limit. But our mind is limitless, so an object can be “divided indefinitely” if we contemplate doing so. A watch is limited in mass; it gets smaller and smaller when divided; when it cannot be divided further, it disappears. This is as taught in the Dharma: a dust particle has neither form nor color. At least not in the way that we see form and color. Scientists have now discovered the existence of a “wave” in wave-particle duality, but that is no more than a very coarse concept. When an object “cannot be divided” any longer, it means if we try to divide it further, it cannot be found.

All dust particles vanish this way. What is left is spaciousness – this is emptiness at the basic level, the negation of existence. Clearly phenomena are without substance, but in our eyes, they literally exist – this is dependent arising. In sum, objects that are finite in scope cannot be divided indefinitely; at some point in time, a limit is reached beyond which they cannot be divided. When objects cannot be broken down further, that is emptiness.

Ordinarily, if you want to use a table, you do not have to examine it, just use it. If you want to examine it – the table is composed of wood planks, the wood planks can be divided further, and so on – you will not find the table at the end. When the table cannot be broken down further, like the car and the house in our previous example, it disappears.

If we wish to understand the true nature of our world and the universe, we can follow the methodology above; at the end we will discover everything is like the sky, there is nothing there. This is the view that Chandrakirti held: if you want to own an object, don’t examine it; if you examine it, you will be left with nothing and feel “disappointed.”

By way of the analysis above, we should fully understand we live in our own illusion twenty-four hours a day. The things we used to think are very real do not exist at all. If we take a step further and examine this so-called self – our skin, muscles, bones, inner organs and so forth – it is also composed of dust particles; like the world outside, the “self” does not exist. Our six kinds of consciousness, or eight kinds of consciousness, are also empty.

Realization of emptiness is essential to liberation

As an ordinary person, we do not need to examine a table in order to use it; we only need to be mindful of cause and result and cyclic existence. This is the viewpoint of the human-celestial vehicle. If we choose to take a step further and practice Madhyamaka or Yogacara, the view and practices of the human-celestial vehicle and Shravakayana are overly simple.

This is how the world is: the external environment and our mind exist as long as we do not examine their true nature; when we examine it, we are left with nothing. This is the natural order or essence of phenomena, not something the Buddha thought up and wanted us to contemplate on. If it is just a rule, we have no reason to accept it. If we accept the rule, it is dogma. The truth is based on evidence; it can undergo analysis and cannot be changed by anyone at will.

Likewise, if you hope to find a self, then forgo your investigation into whether or not a self exists. Because if you look for the self, it cannot be found. Since beginningless time, we have been misled into thinking the self exists and have thus sowed the seed of cyclical existence. The concept of emptiness, which negates the existence of both phenomena and the self, is the only thing that can actually help us advance on the path to liberation.

Hereof, we would advise those who are attached to external objects to avoid contemplation of this kind – just keep dreaming, do not wake up. When you learn to contemplate, it will be like waking up from a big dream! Do not give thought to this question if you want to fully enjoy the material pleasures this world has to offer. But of course if you keep on doing so, you will never be free of suffering!

On the surface, it may seem nothing has been gained from the practices in Madhyamaka or Yogacara after attaining realization. Actually, “attaining nothing” is precisely what we want – this is realization of emptiness. In everyday life, if we lose something and cannot find it, we become very disappointed. But in the practice of emptiness, we are looking

for “nothing.” When we have this view, even if we do not attain realization, at least we have an understanding of emptiness.

Dependent arising and quantum physics

Perhaps some people consider the view of emptiness and its practice to be dogma. This is an absolute mistake. However, regarding our discussion above, academics and scientists should conduct a thorough inquiry into this subject matter. Without due consideration or analysis, the view of emptiness cannot be called religious dogma or superstition. Scientific exploration is specifically embodied in the ongoing research on matter such as atoms, atomic nuclei and fundamental particles – electrons, neutrons, protons, photons, etc. Physicists currently believe a quark or a subquark is the smallest constituent of matter which cannot be further broken down. Actually, this is still inconclusive. With the help of particle accelerators, they have now discovered the existence of a wave that co-exists with the particle. Assuming even more advanced equipment in the future, they will discover new matter. However, they will never be able to rely on instruments to probe the mysteries of the mind.

Despite being held up as a standard, science is at a loss to explain how the mind works. The rapid development of research from classical mechanics to quantum mechanics has led to significant discoveries on the state of matter; with each new finding, a byword is established. Although in sutra, the name used is different, the definition of matter in science and in sutra is very similar. However, in quantum mechanics, a fundamental particle is said to exist; this premise has never changed. In Buddhism, there is no fundamental particle to speak of; all particles can be broken down again and again until they no

longer exist. Hence, the view of emptiness in Buddhism goes well beyond the concept of a fundamental particle. In similarly investigating the basic nature of phenomena, Sakyamuni Buddha chose “no-self” and as a result guided sentient beings towards liberation; regrettably, science chose to produce nuclear weapons and invited a path of destruction. If we stay deluded and do not wake up, we have only ourselves to blame if mankind is brought to extinction. This is a very important difference between Buddhism and science.

Self-realization of emptiness, self-liberation

With an understanding of emptiness, we are only able to sow the seeds of virtue. But realizing emptiness is not an idle phrase, it has to be experienced. The process of realizing emptiness is the process of weakening the attachment to oneself. With practice, “self-attachment” will gradually diminish, but the wisdom of “no-self” will slowly increase. This is the way to liberation. We would be fooling ourselves if we think burning incense and prostrating to the buddhas will get us there. If we seek liberation, we should be like a person who is walking; our eyes should watch the road, our two legs should be moving. If we see but do not take a step, liberation is far away in the distant future; if we don’t see, we cannot move a single step. To see is to establish the view of emptiness; to move is practice emptiness accordingly. Our practice should not be arbitrary, like flipping through a book on the Middle Way when we have nothing to do, getting a quick read on the concept of emptiness, indulging in idle talk on “no-self in phenomena” and so forth. However much we may know, we cannot attain liberation without direct experience and realization.

In Buddhism, dependent arising is a fundamental concept. All things, whether mind or phenomena, come into being as a result of causes and conditions. We have been trapped in the cycle of existence lifetime after lifetime also because of causes and conditions. If causes and conditions are not necessary, would the Buddha also transmigrate in samsara? Clearly, there is no result without a cause, no arising without a condition; everything is produced this way. The cause of cyclic existence is primarily ignorance and desire. Ignorance is not the absence of knowledge; if so, a wall or stone is also ignorant. Ignorance is not knowing the true nature of reality, which causes attachment to the wrong view – self-attachment; with attachment to the self comes desire for worldly things; the result is endless existence in samsara.

Therefore, we must fully comprehend “no-self” in order to escape the cycle of life and death; it is like having wisdom eyes that can clearly see the path to liberation. The next step is to practice. Actually, it is not difficult to practice “no-self.” With practice, everyone can be liberated; unfortunately, so many people know this but few actually practice.

All of us firmly believe in our own opinions and civility. But how civilized are we? We cannot even distinguish between what is essential and what is not. In our short lifespan, we perceive the most important thing to be mere trifle and discard it, but embrace worthless things and end up in samsara. This is ignorance, a perverted perception. We should know our most important goal in life is to seek liberation. However, certain activities such as releasing living creatures or reciting mantras are seen as a form of recreation to be taken up after tea or mealtime. Some people, after practicing a few days in the

mountain, return home because they cannot survive without a bath. Which is more important, liberation or the bath? Clearly, it is not anything outside but we ourselves who are the obstacle to our liberation! If we only make empty promises but do nothing, liberation can never be attained.

People often talk about “receiving blessings”; the buddhas certainly have the power to confer blessings, which are not without benefit. Sakyamuni Buddha once said, “We are our own protector.” That is to say we are our own savior. If we don’t help ourselves, and expect others to come to our rescue, liberation is not possible. Some say the buddhas are compassionate and will lift us out of cyclic existence. This is wishful thinking!

In the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*, there is this story of a monk who was responsible for logistics in the monastic community where he lived. Once, a benefactor handed him a gem as an offering to the monastics in the community, but he kept it for himself. Later when the monastics found out about it, they told the monk to either sell the gem and buy food for everyone or return it to them, but he refused. With every cause, there is a corresponding result. Due to this transgression, the monk had to endure immense and prolonged suffering in hell and in the animal realm. During the lifetime of Sakyamuni Buddha, the monk took rebirth as a fish with four legs and lived in a pond. One day, the Buddha took his disciples to the edge of the pond to tell them the causes and conditions that led to the monk’s rebirth as a fish; moreover, he said the three buddhas before him had also taken their disciples to the edge of the pond to tell them this story; the Buddha then said the buddhas after him will also bring their disciples to this place and recount the same story. Nonetheless, the thousand buddhas of

the Fortunate Aeon will not be able to save the fish. This is all due to the monk’s own karma.

We can protect ourselves only by aspiring to attain liberation and practicing the right way, no one else can help us. For instance, on the surface it may appear Amitabha Buddha is saving us, but we ourselves must truly cultivate bodhicitta, abandon evil and practice virtue, show remorse for wrongdoing, and work diligently on our studies and practice in order for Amitabha Buddha to deliver us. If we do nothing, Amitabha Buddha cannot save us either. It is not that the Buddha is not compassionate or unfair, he is unable to help those who diverge from the substance of the teachings. The Buddha can only transmit the methods; whether we practice or not is entirely up to us. If we continue to follow our habitual tendencies, lose sight of what is important, and chase after worldly things that have no value, it’s hard to say when we will ever attain liberation.

Some people who think highly of themselves believe: I have listened to *The Innermost Heart Drop of the Guru (Lama Yangtik)*^① and other Dzogchen teachings, received many empowerments, appeared in the company of so many living buddhas, I will definitely attain buddhahood even without practice! They then wait for liberation to drop into their lap. This is just absurd!

To be conferred the Dzogchen empowerment and lineage is indeed sacred; it is the result of infinite blessings accumulated over countless kalpas. If we do not break the tantric vows, we will attain liberation within seven lifetimes. However, let us calm down and examine whether our habitual tendencies still exist after listening to the Dzogchen teachings. Have we purified our conduct? Have we experienced a change in our mind? Actually,

it is easy to tell if we have changed. After listening to *The Innermost Heart Drop of the Guru* and the Dzogchen teachings, do we still delight in and never tire of the things we used to be interested in; are we still unconcerned with the things we did not want to do before; do we still refrain from practice? If we follow this process of examination, we may find we have not changed at all.

A person may encounter the rare opportunity to listen to the Dzogchen teachings, but if he or she becomes very proud and complacent, and fails to observe the samaya commitments, this kind of person whom we have mentioned in previous teachings is headed towards darkness from light. We must not take this casually!

As ordinary people, everything we have done since beginningless time is perverted. We normally do not undertake virtuous deeds; even when we recognize the need to practice virtue, we only do so superficially. Perhaps we practice giving just to gain fame and profit in this world. Some people burn incense and prostrate to the buddhas to secure a successful career, gain wealth and be promoted, ensure their children go to college and bring honor to their ancestors. But these have nothing to do with liberation. To attain liberation, we must not allow these activities to preoccupy us and waste our precious human birth.

Practicing emptiness

If you want to be a true practitioner, you should set aside at least an hour each day to practice. The specific practice is as follows: with your body in the sevenfold meditation posture

of Vairochana, first take refuge, then generate bodhicitta, lastly enter into contemplation. For most people, the practice of no-self begins with examining one's own body, not the world outside. Using the method described earlier, the body can be successively broken down into its parts until it is reduced to emptiness; this is a relatively simple method. Next examine the mind which likewise can be reduced to an instant. In Madhyamaka and tantra, this practice is known as mind watching mind; once the mind calms down, it will notice the mind actually does not exist and is fundamentally empty.

Whether the method used is examination or mind watching mind, the key is to thoroughly experience the nonexistence or emptiness of all things. People ordinarily feel the circumstances in a dream are real; as soon as they wake up, they discover it is all an illusion. In the same way, if we do not examine the world inside and outside, everything appears substantive and very real. Using the method above or other methods to examine things, we will discover the world that we cling to is like a dream or a rainbow, which basically does not exist. This is the actual state of all phenomena, the irrefutable and unchanging truth.

After following this method of examination and gaining realization of no-self or emptiness, maintain that state of realization and level of concentration. The longer we stay focused the better, but at the early stage, begin with half a minute or a minute only; when discursive thoughts arise, go back to the examination and start over again. Repeat this process over and over, then end with a dedication to enlightenment. This is a relatively easy practice on emptiness.

At the beginning, there is no point in elaborating on the generation or completion stage and other advanced practices. Only this kind of practice is dependable and appropriate. As long as we stay firm and do not regress, work diligently on the practice, our self-attachment will gradually weaken, our desire, anger, ignorance, arrogance and other afflictions will completely vanish. We deserve to be called a true practitioner only in this way!

[Notes]

- ❶ *The Innermost Heart Drop of the Guru*: one of the *Four Parts of Nyingtik* by the great Dzogchen master Longchenpa. To compile the most profound pith instructions of Dzogchen, this teaching is the essence of all the instructions Longchenpa gave in his lifetime. It is a precious text unsurpassed for dispelling doubt and obstacles to practice; moreover, it is said to contain inconceivable blessings of mind transmission.

Advice from Mipham Rinpoche to the Beginners

*Alas! Things in samsara are all meaningless,
Just as impermanent as a bolt of lightning,
Death comes at no certain time,
Thus, don't make plans far into the future.
Practice the guru's teaching,
Determine the nature of mind in a quiet place.
Mind is like lightening, wind, and clouds,
Defiled by many a rambling thought,
It is rootless on close examination,
Like the misty illusion from dust particles in the sun,
At once empty and existent.
Mind rests naturally in its original state,
The nature of mind manifests with solid practice.
Strong faith in the lama is essential for blessing,
Accumulation and purification give rise to realization,
Thus, practice diligently.*

This teaching from Mipham Rinpoche is an actual practice. It is an exoteric practice suitable for all who have faith in the Dharma. No other qualification, such as having received empowerment, is required.

What is the distinction between a beginner and a non-beginner?

The so-called beginner, like most of us, is someone who has just started to learn the Dharma and attained very little realization, if any. A non-beginner is someone who can take deadly poison and sustain no harm at all purely through the power of his or her own realization, without relying on any external help such as medication.

So, do not assume you are no longer a beginner just because you have learned the Dharma for two or three years. As mentioned, only those who can neutralize the effect of a poisonous substance on their own are deemed in a rank superior to the beginner. Check yourself against this benchmark and you would know clearly where you stand.

This treatise is organized in two parts: the preliminary and the actual practice.

Preliminary practice

1. Samsara is pointless

Alas! Things in samsara are all meaningless,

Just as impermanent as a bolt of lightning,

Mipham Rinpoche told us that, strictly speaking, all worldly

things such as fame and wealth have no meaning other than to sustain our livelihood. They are not only meaningless but also as impermanent as lightning and as illusory as a drama.

Although our forefathers said that life is but a play, and others also echo this saying, none of them can explain why life is like a play. The fact is everyone still thinks life and a play are different – life is real, whereas a play is made up.

We all understand money, status, fame, and so on represent the great ideal in life for worldly people. The external appeal is too powerful to resist, so we all end up spending our precious life and time chasing after them. We can't stand the idea that we don't have what others have, that we cannot keep up with the Joneses.

However, the Buddha didn't think there is much value in worldly fame and fortune. Instead, we should establish a new purpose in life. And the first step is to elevate our mindset.

Some very prominent and powerful people have also told us in private that they feel special and superior in gatherings where they are praised by others, but realize they are just ordinary people once they are back home alone. Knowing what they own can be lost at any time, they are no different from everyone else. Even so, they cannot escape from the temptation of fame and wealth.

The reason why we place emphasis on worldly gains has much to do with how we were brought up, and the education environment. Ever since the first grade in primary school, we have been told by teachers, family, and friends that we should

have a career, make lots of money, become winners who are envied by others in society, and feel proud about ourselves. Since this is the common view held by people around us, it is very difficult for us to change.

Nowadays, our living condition is much better, but the same cannot be said about ourselves. We are instead getting older and weaker every year, closer to death every year. Internally, the makeup of channels, winds, and the flow of energy worsen year after year as well.

For example, our bodies now often encounter the attacks of illness, aging, and death. Upon death, when one's consciousness separates from the body, the body will decompose within a few hours and eventually disappear completely from this planet. However, some tantric practices can transform our bodies into vajra bodies.

What is a vajra body?

Vajra means unchanging, indestructible, inseparable, not illusory, etc.

In terms of the body, vajra body is the carrier of the buddha's wisdom, just as our body is the carrier of our consciousness.

In terms of mind, presently it is not free, not at ease. Our mind is constantly disturbed by the environment and is apt to produce all sorts of reactions on encountering external objects.

Buddha Sakyamuni discovered that, from the body and mind of an ordinary person, the ultimate wisdom of the buddha

can be extracted and the vajra body of the buddha experienced. Through practice, one can experience for oneself the eternally unchanging wisdom of the buddha.

The most critical reason that worldly people get stuck in samsara is because they don't know the buddha within themselves, hence they only chase the external elements that fascinate their senses.

Although the Buddha knew samsara is devoid of any meaning, he would not ask us to withdraw completely from the materialistic life right away because it is impossible for sentient beings in the desire realm to do. We in the desire realm must rely on external conditions such as food, oxygen, and the like to live.

The Buddha meant to point out that external things are only the prerequisite for living, not the purpose of life.

Although every individual and organization need to develop a long-term plan for this life, these plans do not really benefit us. Moreover, they may turn out to be just games we are fooled by, the result of which is to take away our life-long freedom and time.

2. Impermanence

Death comes at no certain time,

Thus, don't make plans far into the future.

Everyone must face death and it can happen at any time. Life is short, so don't make plans too far into the future.

In fact, death is not the end of everything but a turning point in life. There are numerous stages in life, and death is but a short trip on a very long journey.

However, many people are not prepared for the long journey. Because we have focused all our thoughts and actions on just this life. This can be said a real failure in life.

The Buddha's view is to include one's journey in the next life and lives after that into one's long-term plan; as for this life, refrain from harboring too much attachment, just be content with less desires.

To be content with less desires is not to say one should live in a cave, like Milarepa, eating coarse food and wearing shabby clothes. It means we should not waste an excessive amount of energy on material pursuits. The ideal is to live a simple and relatively stable life, which is neither too poor nor too extravagant.

First of all, a moderate lifestyle helps not only one's spiritual practice but also society. The pursuit of economic development worldwide at the expense of the environment is a fact we all know. The more we allow our greed to expand, the greater we need to develop and consume energy. Being content with less desires can prevent over-development of energy and reduce harm to the natural environment.

Secondly, we need not purposely choose to live in poverty or be frugal. This can prevent afflictions from arising during practice.

The Buddha ruled that so long as the monastics don't have greed in their minds and do not take material things seriously, they can live in comfort. If owing to the merit accumulated in their previous lives, they don't need to work hard to gather wealth, such as owning five hundred buildings as luxurious as the five-star hotels, they are free to use those assets as they please. They don't necessarily have to live in a shabby place.

We all know that the Buddha's rules for the monastics are the most stringent, relative to the lay Buddhists. If the monastics can enjoy such treatment, the laity is certainly allowed to live a comfortable life.

There's a story to illustrate this:

One day, Patrul Rinpoche paid a visit to a master and saw the master's house full of things.

Patrul Rinpoche didn't say anything, but muttered quietly to himself, "The master is a man of few desires, but there are really too many things in his house."

Knowing Patrul Rinpoche's disapproval, the master got straight to the point, "You may think I am not a person who is content with few desires, but the truth is I am not as attached to these things as you are to that wooden bowl of yours."

Many people knew Patrul Rinpoche was very attached to the wooden bowl his root lama left him.

On the other hand, except for a very few with great merit accumulated from previous lives, most laypeople do not have the good fortune to just naturally live a normal life without

having to work for it. Therefore, the Buddha acceded to our need to work, to build a career with reasonable effort.

However, if one considers money to be all important, and ethics, karma, family, conscience, etc. to be useless things, it is a completely mistaken value.

I have studied Buddhist philosophy for more than twenty years, read books on physics, astronomy, and western philosophy, as well as discussed and exchanged ideas with some physicists over the years. My conclusion is the view of Buddha Sakyamuni represents the sole, absolute truth. I say this not because I am a Buddhist. Nor was I ever forced to follow the Buddha. If there were flaws in the Buddhist view, conduct, and practice that could be inferred from other cutting-edge theories, I would not believe in or praise Buddhadharma blindly. However, after learning the Dharma, not only did I not find any flaw in Buddhism, I have gained true wisdom from it. Only Buddhadharma can thoroughly explain questions regarding the world and life. This is the reason why I want to share my experience.

It is a fact there are also many truths in other branches of knowledge such as philosophy and science, but no one can proclaim they are the ultimate truth nor accept their validity wholly. Scientists themselves also admit that science is still in the development stage, not at its absolute peak yet.

Buddha Sakyamuni, on the other hand, reached the pinnacle of human wisdom. He understood thoroughly the true nature of the universe and samsara from his farsighted and extraordinary point of view and summed up his own experience

as well. From the position of an old hand, he proceeded to tell us how to elevate an ordinary person to the state of the enlightened. Many people were able to attain wisdom of the buddha after listening to and following Buddha Sakyamuni's teachings. This is a fact that no one can deny.

Besides Buddha Sakyamuni's teachings, there is really no other education or method that can completely elevate people to a higher state in either the Eastern or Western culture. I believe the Buddha's idea is truly an epoch-making thought system. It is not just relevant at the present time. A hundred years from now, people will realize the way of living propagated by the Buddha is really the most ideal way to live.

Although humans appear to have relatively more wisdom than other species, no one has been able to define oneself precisely - what am I? What will I become after advancing to a higher state mentally? Scientists at best are knowledgeable about the material world and are able to create new and better living conditions.

There are people who think Buddhism is superstition and dogma.

When we pass judgment on something, be it praise or criticism, it must be based on evidence. If one just makes an accusation at will, without prior research and careful consideration, one risks being blindsided by one's own superstition.

People consider upgrading or improving worldly possessions a real skill or capability, not superstition; to things

they don't know anything about, they just casually label them as superstition. This is really nonsense!

Some people think Buddhism is very passive.

This is another example of not knowing at all what Buddhist practitioners do. Buddhists have the noble aim of delivering all sentient beings from suffering and have long-term plans that continue as long as samsara continues. Worldly people, however positive they may be, generally aim high just for this life; they are unlikely to concern themselves with other beings' happiness or dedicate themselves to the task of delivering all sentient beings from samsara. Their goals, however long, are no more than a few decades. In this sense, Buddhism is very dynamic, not passive at all.

As Buddhists, we should first establish the right view. Right view comes from hearing and pondering the Dharma. Just like the purpose of academic study is for future needs in life and work, the purpose of hearing and pondering the Dharma is for meditative practice. Hearing and pondering precede practicing; the three must not be separated. Every Buddhist must acquire Buddhist knowledge to be qualified to undertake practice.

Main practice

1. View

i) The best way to search for the view

■ Rely on the teacher's pith instructions

Practice the guru's teaching,

Then Mipham Rinpoche proceeded to tell us that life is finite. In this finite process, don't make infinite plans. It is impossible to complete infinite plans in a limited lifetime, so do the sensible thing based on one's own time.

What is the sensible thing? It is to take the path that leads safely to the exit of samsara. To go on this path, one should first listen to the words of one's teacher, contemplate repeatedly the meaning of the teaching, then go to a quiet place to practice after having gained a good understanding of the content.

■ Abide in a quiet place

Determine the nature of mind in a quiet place.

The so-called quiet place means a location suitable for meditative practice. Strictly speaking, the best place is akin to Milarepa's where there is no one else but yourself. If one cannot find such a place for the time being, feels uncomfortable in such a place, or doesn't have the means to stay in such a place, one should just find somewhere relatively quiet with little interference from humans and non-humans alike. The point is to be able to explore and grasp the mystery of mind in a somewhat natural and safe environment.

The reason why we need to explore the mystery of mind is that our number one driving force is the mind, not the almighty God.

Mind is the creator, the governor, and the destroyer of all phenomena. Buddhists need not argue whether external objects are matter or mind because phenomena are neither matter nor mind, just illusions; the source of the illusions is our minds, not

philosophy, science, or religion. As external objects themselves are non-existent, there is no point for us to be stubbornly fixated on them, questioning whether they are matter or mind as if they really exist.

In the Madhyamaka practice, we are asked to observe emptiness thoroughly. Even if the object is just a small flower, we need to break the gross matter down into ever smaller parts until there is only energy left at the end, and experience emptiness then. But this process is unnecessary. We don't need to observe whether a house, a car, the world, or the universe is void or not, because they are but our minds' creations. We can just turn around, and look into our minds. Once we have the secrets of the mind in hand, all questions are solved. This is the pith instruction of the Mahayana tradition.

ii) What is the view?

Mind has two aspects.

■ The appearance of mind

Mind is like lightening, wind, and clouds,

Defiled by many a rambling thought,

The appearance of mind is akin to lightening, wind, and clouds. One should often think about how mind is defiled by the external objects, the myriad discursive thoughts.

Why is it like lightening? We all know when there is lightening, its flash of light can brighten the ground as in daytime, but only for a very brief time, then it's gone. Likewise, our minds also change from one moment to the next. For

example, when the thought "I want to be in high position and make money" arises, it may stay for a long time if one does not observe it. However, if one observes this thought at the very moment when it arises, neither stop nor foster it, one may discover every thought is like a lightening that appears suddenly and disappears the next moment. It ceases and arises by itself every moment.

There is also a similar practice in Mahamudra. One just observes what is going through one's mind. When another thought arises, observe that as well. Just take note of every thought that crosses the mind.

Many people think this is realization of emptiness, but it is not. It is merely discovering the natural order of things, just like our eyes can see a lightening disappear in a few seconds, but it doesn't mean our eyes have realized emptiness.

Why is the mind like wind? On close examination, the wind also has color and weight. But from a simpler perspective, we can only feel a soft breeze on our face, sense a piercing cold wind through our body, or hear a howling wind with our ears; normally, we cannot see the wind. Likewise, our minds are constantly filled with many afflictions, insights, and so forth, but when we really turn around to see what an affliction looks like, no one can tell.

Why is the mind like clouds? On a good day, we can see a cloud here and there. In an airplane, it feels as if we are sitting on clouds; on a high mountain, we feel the clouds are passing us by. Clouds can appear in different shapes, like mountains, rivers, animals, buildings, etc., but they are none of those.

Besides, in a clear blue sky, dark clouds can gather suddenly, followed by thunder and rain. But after a while, the dark clouds are all gone. Where did the clouds go? Are they hiding somewhere we cannot see? No. The clouds just disappear right where we can see for no reason.

There are many other metaphors that can describe the state of mind, but these three are the most typical.

Ever since we were kids, we have never examined what our thoughts are like. From primary school to college, we have been taught how to master the advanced techniques, how to change the outside world, how to conquer nature, and so forth. No teacher has ever asked us to look inward to see our own thoughts, to better ourselves, to know ourselves.

Thanks to modern technology, we can now locate any city in the world with its longitude and latitude through the Global Positioning System (GPS), but can we position ourselves? The answer is no. Even scientists and philosophers cannot do this, let alone ordinary people like us.

In the nineteenth century or earlier, some thought they could finally define what mind or consciousness is. Some suggested mind is a product of the brain or the activity of the brain because when the brain is hit by a hard object, one feels dizzy and sees sparks fly before one's eyes. Others thought mind is a product of the heart because when some people feel scared or sad, their hearts ache.

All these only prove that mind is closely related to the brain and heart, but no one can thus conclude that mind is a product of either.

As technology continues to develop, even some scientists don't agree with the old theory. Although the mainstream thinking has not changed at this point, that is, mind is produced by the brain, not all scientists accept this view, including a Nobel Prize winner in neurobiology whose view is entirely different from that in the past.

Over the years, many scholars and theologians have been baffled by the question regarding the mind. No one has been able to give a convincing definition, except Buddha Sakyamuni. As a result, many people claim that mind does not exist.

So, where is the mind? This only Buddhism can answer. Our minds are like the wind, without shape and color, neither in the brain nor in the heart.

In my opinion, Buddha Sakyamuni is the greatest neuroscientist in the world because the state of mind is already explained very clearly in Buddhist tantra. Many of the descriptions of mind in tantra have not been discovered in the medical field so far; nevertheless, they do exist from the perspective of the practitioners. For the time being, we don't need to know too much. Our purpose here is to give a definition of mind.

Don't make thoughts complicated, simply look at what mind is like.

■ The nature of mind

It is rootless on close examination,

Like the misty illusion from dust particles in the sun,

At once empty and existent.

We never know what mind is when not observing it at all; after making some observations, we find out it is like lightening, wind, and clouds. Now we need to explore further what the nature of mind is.

In terms of Buddhist theory, the nature of all phenomena is emptiness, so should the nature of mind. But we should not force ourselves to accept this view just because the Buddha said so. What we should do instead is to see for ourselves what mind truly is, regardless of what the Buddha said.

It would be hard if we want to prove to others, at the macro level, all phenomena including the galaxies in the universe are created by the mind. But in our own small world, our emotions and relationship with others are all closely related to mind. Mind has been hiding in the backstage, controlling how we live and think. Our feeling of happiness, sadness, harmony, contradiction, and so forth are all functions of mind which are constantly affecting us. Now we must see clearly who this mastermind behind the scenes really is.

The best way to examine this is to practice Guru Yoga after finishing the preliminaries and visualize the guru dissolve into one's mind at the end; or visualize the guru, buddhas, and bodhisattvas in front and pray for their blessings to help gain realization of emptiness, to find the nature of mind. After praying, let the mind quiet down.

Then contemplate this: All phenomena constantly arise and cease in a split second. Upon leaving the prior state of a phenomenon (ceasing) and entering a new state (arising), can we still find the prior state? No way. What's past cannot

reappear, only its image remains. This is true not only of mind but also the external objects, such as buildings and the like.

Some suggest that Einstein once said matter can go back to the past when it reaches faster-than-light speed. But it is a mistaken idea. Any matter, once it disappears in this world, will never return. Even if we see the appearance of someone becoming young again in one's old age or going back in time, it is just a newly created look-alike of the past, not the real past coming back to life. This is the simplest and most basic explanation of "the past mind cannot be found."

Next, that which we call "present" does not exist in this world. One second at present can also be cut into numerous fragments of past and future, but we just cannot find the present anywhere. This is the meaning of "the present mind cannot be found."

Then, is the future hiding somewhere and waiting for the right condition to appear, like waiting to jump out on the stage when the curtain is pulled open? Of course not. The future denotes something yet to come, so it cannot possibly exist either, hence "the future mind cannot be found."

Mind does not need space to exist; it can be anywhere. It is however more closely related to time. When the thought "I need to make some money" appears for a second in our minds, we can break down this one second. In the periodic table of elements, #109 is a short-lived element which disintegrates in one five thousandth of a second. If we break one second down to one five thousandth, one fifty thousandth, one five hundred thousandth, one five millionth, etc. of a second, we will find

in the end the one second no longer exists. So, what becomes of the mind after this breakdown? On what base is one's mind formed?

In the micro-world, physics has offered good evidence for us. Many people used to think Buddhadharma would collapse in the face of advances in science; actually we need not worry about scientific development, but should instead be very grateful to it. If not for Einstein, Bohr, Prandtl, Heisenberg, and others who provided solid evidence to prove the emptiness of phenomena, it would not have been as easy to convince people in the modern age of the idea of emptiness, even though Buddhadharma is complete with its own set of theory. Nowadays, no one would object to using science to explain Buddhist theory. Science has helped Buddhism, at least I think so. Heart-felt thanks to those prominent scientists.

I once met an American professor teaching Tibetan Buddhism at a university. He said when he taught Yogacara (Mind-Only School) to students who were confused, he would ask them if they knew Heisenberg's theory. When they said yes, he then proceeded to tell them the view in Yogacara is what Heisenberg proposed in his quantum mechanics theory. Immediately, they all understood and accepted it.

Certainly, we cannot equate Heisenberg's quantum theory with Yogacara; there are great discrepancies between the two. However, modern science is the only tool we can use to help people today understand Buddhism. Science can help spread the Dharma better. Whether it is science or Buddhadharma, they both represent the essence of human wisdom.

Those who have studied physics or who like to read popular science articles know that eventually all matter with mass can transform into energy. Energy is completely different from matter in its normal sense because it is not solid. If so, on what base are our bodies formed?

Although there is the idea of an infinitesimal in Western philosophy, it is a mathematical misconception which represents merely a hypothesis of infinite continuation, far removed from objective existence. For example, the difference in weight between one kilogram and ten kilograms is due to their respective quantities of atoms or particles. This shows that the number of particles, which are even smaller than atoms, are finite, not infinitesimal. Although we may break down matter and time infinitely in our thoughts, it is only an unrealistic hypothesis.

If neither space nor time can accommodate our bodies and minds, where can we abide in the whole universe? Following this train of thought, one comes to realize deeply all is like a mirage, an illusion born of nothing.

Take another example. When one watches a TV screen from afar, the images appear full and clear; if a magnifier is used, one no longer sees complete images, only numerous colorful dots in red, green, white, etc.; on further analysis, there are no more colors, only some long and short waves. Hence, the images on the screen are also formed on the basis of mistaken illusions.

If we want to find an absolute truth in the human world, we may discover the closer we get to the truth, the more difficult it is to define who we are.

Let us think about this: What is the basis of our minds? Does mind exist or not? If it does not exist, our education is worthless. For example, if mind were really a chemical reaction of the brain, no criminal would need to go to jail to be reformed; just change a chemical element in the brain. It is the same as taking a car which is insentient to a garage to change parts, not to jail, when it breaks down. This says clearly man has a mind, cars don't. If mind exists, what is it like then?

Since birth, we have lived and died with a very vague idea about ourselves. But this should not continue.

We can bear not having money but should not tolerate not having awareness. We would rather be poor than be foolish. What is a foolish person? Is an uneducated person a foolish person? An educated person is not necessarily wise as many well-educated people have also done foolish things, such as crimes committed in the hi-tech industry. Huineng, the sixth patriarch of Chan Buddhism, was illiterate, but no one would question his wisdom. We would say a foolish or unwise person is one who cannot define or does not know exactly what he or she is.

2. Practice

i) The specific method of practice

Mind rests naturally in its original state,

With thorough analysis and observation as mentioned above, one can truly experience the void nature of mind; nothing exists at all.

Once the sense of mind's emptiness arises, stop thinking of anything else, just abide naturally in this original state – all

thoughts stop and dissolve into empty space; the body naturally relaxes and remains still. If the sense of emptiness is rather firm and clear, it can be deemed a preliminary understanding of emptiness.

If, however, one gets only a vague impression instead of a clear sense of emptiness following the analysis and observations, there is no other way but to repeat the exercise again and again until the sense of emptiness arises.

Does it serve any purpose just to keep the mind still? No. The following story can better explain this question.

About seventy or eighty years ago, there was a highly accomplished Dzogchen master in Serta (Sichuan province) whose disciples were also great practitioners. In those troubled times, his disciples carried themselves very differently from others, exemplifying the kind of noble demeanor befitting a practitioner. It just showed how great their teacher was!

At that time, there was a person who practiced samatha all the time. After many years, he developed a tendency of becoming completely still even when he was eating or walking, like a computer that can crash at any given moment. He could remain in this condition for a couple of days without any trouble, but all along he was unable to attain a sense of emptiness.

The master knew there was a problem with his practice, so he sent a young lama every day to play with him, doing whatever – patting his head, screaming at him, to disturb him; furthermore, the master asked four persons to monitor him,

making sure he could not meditate for three years, and required this practitioner to recite the heart mantra of Chenrezig one hundred million times. During this time, the master frequently called on this person and others to come play Tibetan chess with him to prevent him from entering the calm-abiding state.

This shows merely being able to stay still can also become an obstacle to realizing emptiness.

Combining realization of emptiness with calm-abiding is the best way to practice. When the state of realization of emptiness lasts for a long time, it represents samatha and vipassana are inseparable from one another. This is a very good state of meditation, in which vipassana—the realization of emptiness, is most crucial, not calm-abiding. The practitioner in the story lacked the most crucial element in his practice, so he could not achieve any result even though his mind was extremely quiet.

In the past, many lay practitioners often liked to talk about mysterious experiences, such as the dreams they had last night or a certain light that appeared before them during their practice. Such behavior caused much misunderstanding of Buddhism by many non-Buddhists.

What can a light do? Can you attain liberation with it? It sounds like heresy. I have also read some articles about qigong, one of which mentions a certain qigong master; on a flight that the master took, a circle of light surrounded the airplane and followed it all the way to the airport... If we Buddhists also say such things, it indicates Buddhism has degenerated. The so-called supernatural power cannot prove anything; it may just be an illusion which is not useful at all.

There was once this story in Tibet. Several practitioners were doing a retreat together; somehow one of them acquired a certain magical power such that while in his meditation, he could see clearly who was going to come up to the mountain to visit, what that person carried in his bag, be it yogurt, tsampa or meat. He often reported this to his lama as well.

One day, the lama called this disciple over and unexpectedly hung his own prayer beads on the disciple's neck. A couple of days later, this practitioner lost his magical power.

One should always follow the standard method when undertaking Buddhist practice, of which the key point is to attain realization of emptiness. Without realization of emptiness, a still mind alone does not lead to liberation; on the other hand, if realization of emptiness is not accompanied by a quiet mind, the state of realization interrupted by racing thoughts cannot last.

ii) The result of practice

The nature of mind manifests with solid practice.

Lay practitioners generally have rather good faith but it is not stable enough. If one combines good faith with the Vajrasattva practice to purify evil karma, the mandala offering practice to accumulate merit, and the generation of renunciation and bodhicitta, it will not be that difficult to gain an initial understanding of emptiness. If the faith is extremely strong, sudden realization is also possible. Such a realization is already very close to tantric realization. Nonetheless, for the state of realization to continue to develop and grow, it depends on one's own view and degree of diligence in practice.

It is common for some practitioners to long for attaining realization so much that they exert great effort to achieve that goal. Once they succeed, they become complacent and make no more progress. I think it is very critical to allow the state of realization to continue to develop and grow.

Some may think attaining realization means attaining buddhahood, but the two are still far apart. It is true after gaining preliminary realization, we can resolve normal afflictions by ourselves, but it is not enough when encountering stronger obstruction as the wisdom gained at this level is still rather weak. Only when our realization of emptiness has grown to a strong enough level can we hope to resolve all problems then.

3. Action

Endeavor to apply the two factors for attaining realization:

i) Strengthen the faith

Strong faith in the lama is essential for blessing,

Mipham Rinpoche said here one should also strengthen the faith in one's lama after attaining realization by practicing Guru Yoga often.

In tantra, especially the realization of Dzogchen, the most crucial point is the lama's blessing instead of a practitioner's own attributes such as intelligence. One needs to have faith to receive the lama's blessing; absent this faith, one cannot have the blessing.

ii) Accumulation and purification

Accumulation and purification give rise to realization,

Along with the Guru Yoga practice, one needs to practice the mandala offering, life release, and other such actions to accumulate merit, and undertake the Vajrasattva practice to purify karmic obstacles. By doing these practices, those who have not gained any result in their practice will attain realization; and those who have already attained realization will see their state of realization become clearer and more obvious.

Thus, practice diligently.

Please don't think that because Dzogchen has many extraordinary methods, one can attain realization, even buddhahood, without having to practice at all. The fact is if one has not even tasted emptiness one bit, practicing Dzogchen would be out of the question; conversely, if one has somewhat experienced emptiness and endeavor to grow that experience continuously, we can presume one will arrive at the state of Dzogchen eventually. Therefore, practice diligently.

The Key to Observing the Mind

After all the preliminary and samatha practices are completed and before starting the main practice of Dzogchen, there are some quasi-Dzogchen practices to be done. One very important practice among these is a pith instruction on observing the mind by Mipham Rinpoche.

View

Specifically, there are two phases:

1. All phenomena arise from mind

What is the origin of the world? What is the relationship between matter and mind?

Some suggest the world is made of matter. Mind is created by matter, a product of matter.

But nowadays, this opinion is increasingly untenable. As science continues to progress, scientists have found it very difficult to define matter because more and more of their studies show that matter is illusory. It has no real substance.

In fact, the world is neither matter nor mind, nor the aggregate of matter and mind. It is but an illusion. Matter or the

world is created by the mind, a product of the mind. Everything from a great chiliocosm and the six realms of samsara down to things in everyday life are illusions of the mind. All phenomena of the desire realm, the form realm, and the formless realm are actually projections of the mind (called self-manifestations in Madhyamaka). They are not external entities that exist objectively.

This viewpoint is not as complicated as that of the Yogacara School, nor is it equivalent to that of Idealism or the view held in the exoteric scriptures on this subject. It is a unique point of view of Unsurpassed Yoga Tantra.

Additionally, we can also think of the relationship between mind and the world in three stages: first, mind is the creator of the world; second, mind is the perceiver of the world; third, mind is the destroyer of the world. Just like during a dream, mind is the creator and the perceiver of the dream, as well as the destroyer of the dream upon waking up.

Firstly, matter itself, including insentient things like stones, bricks, rebar, cement, cars, etc., is without consciousness, so it cannot engender illusions. Only mind can do that. As the world is a massive illusion, it can only be created by mind.

Secondly, matter cannot, but mind can, perceive what's good and bad, big and small, virtue and non-virtue, suffering and happiness in the world.

Mind first creates a world, then perceives it. No one would know the world exists if the mind doesn't feel it.

For example, without eye consciousness, one sees nothing;

to this person, it's as if the world doesn't exist. Without ear consciousness, one hears nothing; to this person, it's as if no sound exists outside. By the same token, all other external objects are thus perceived.

If someone is taken as one's beloved, one would be distraught with grief if an accident were to happen to that person; if the same person is seen as one's most hated enemy, most people in general perhaps would consider that person's death or bad luck to be great news; if this person is viewed as a total stranger, one would feel indifferent, even toward his or her death. Thus, it can be seen objectively there is no such thing as friend or foe. It is purely our mind that decides who is a friend or a foe. This decision is made not by the five sense organs or the alaya consciousness. The sixth consciousness, or mind consciousness, calls all the shots.

If enemies and friends are objectively existing entities, an enemy should always be an enemy, and a friend always a friend. However, in reality a friend this month may become an enemy next month; an enemy this month may turn into a close friend next month. For instance, we usually think of parents as loved ones, but it may not be the case because parents and children may become mortal enemies if they mismanage their relationship. This is not caused by external changes, but changes taking place in the mind.

If your mind doesn't like a person, you will not fall in love with this person even if he or she cares for you more than your own family; conversely, someone may be very cold to you and often try to bully or hurt you, yet you cannot help but like the person. It is your mind that's haunted!

If mind does not perceive the world around us, no matter how great the happiness and suffering may be, they are irrelevant to us.

For example, if one's relative died horribly of a car accident, one will not feel anything before hearing the news; it is like nothing happened because mind has yet felt anything. Once hearing the bad news, mind begins to feel, and suffering ensues. There would not be so many complicated things and relationships in the world if the sixth consciousness did not create and perceive.

Take the example of dancing. Dancing itself is not a person but a kind of exercise. If dancing were a person, a dancer would be dancing all the time. Likewise, happiness is not an external object but a human feeling. If happiness were an external object, this happy "object" would always bring us happiness. But the reality is not so.

If mind cannot feel happiness, happiness does not exist. For example, some feel elated to be a high official in the government, others shun such position. If high position in the government equates to real happiness, the leader of every country in the world must be the happiest. But the two are not equivalent. If one is forced to be a government official, one cannot feel happiness one bit, and may be miserable instead, because one's sixth consciousness does not perceive this as happiness. However, if later one changes one's mind believing power represents happiness, a high position in the government will then bring temporary happiness. Conversely, if one is forced to be an ordinary citizen or to meditate in a quiet place, against his or her will, one will be full of complaint. Nevertheless, if

after a few years of being an ordinary citizen or a meditator in the mountain, one can adjust to and appreciate this stress-free way of life along with the opportunity to pursue more meaningful goals in life, one can experience happiness.

Likewise, many people think going to jail is the most unbearable because it takes away their freedom. But there are also those who can take things easy in jail, even make use of this time to meditate single-mindedly.

A Chinese book titled *What is Happiness* compiles the viewpoints of 155 experts from around the world on what happiness is. Some claim a happy family is happiness, some say a stable income is happiness, and so on. But these are not at all the nature of happiness.

People who have amicable family relationships and a stable income still may not feel happiness. Happiness is in fact a special sense of the mind that cannot be found anywhere outside of the mind.

It can be proved that happiness and suffering are mind's creations. For example, when our mind feels satisfied, we can still enjoy life no matter how difficult the external condition may be. Many ordinary practitioners take pleasure in their simple way of life, let alone an accomplished master like Milarepa. Their happiness index, if measured, is much higher than those living in luxury. On the other hand, if our mind is not content because we lack purpose in life, luxury itself cannot bring happiness, not even a genuine smile to our face. The difference is in the power of the mind.

Some people think living in a villa or driving an expensive car means happiness. If one were to be locked in a villa every day or made to drive an expensive car all day long, it would turn out to be an unspeakable pain for anyone to bear. This is all due to the change of mind. Although many people envy the rich and the powerful, still some don't. If money and power are objectively appealing, the whole world should like them unanimously; but it is not so. Therefore, without examination, happiness and suffering seem to be related to external phenomena, but they are not.

In their research of fifty years, psychologists, economists, and sociologists have reached the conclusion that happiness and suffering depend not on a person's living standard nor the quality of his or her external environment.

Thus, it shows that happiness and suffering are not objective reality but subjective perception. Happiness consists of happiness itself and the cause of happiness. The cause of happiness is objective; happiness itself is a subjective perception of the mind. The same applies to suffering. In fact, the Buddha said long ago happiness and suffering are not due to objective causes but subjective consciousness. As the Buddha had attained ultimate wisdom, he understood the human mindset. The teachings he left behind are filled with wisdom far beyond our reach.

However, we consistently think happiness and suffering come from objective elements. Western culture such as the Enlightenment and other intellectual movements furthered this fallacy and led countless people onto the wrong path of materialism. This is also the basic reason why developed

countries in the West have not been able to pinpoint happiness so far.

It is stated in Tibetan logic as well that from the perspective of relative truth, cause and condition exist. But the fact is no real cause and condition exist amid all phenomena. The so-called cause and condition are all constructs of the sixth consciousness.

The logical thinking is where there is smoke, there is fire, and vice versa. As a result, the sixth consciousness believes the two are related, that fire is cause, smoke is effect. In fact, this is just an illusion on the macro level. In the micro-world, these are all phenomena created by the sixth consciousness; none of these really exists.

Because the sixth consciousness first creates a world, the world as an entity is a rather solid one, relatively speaking. After it is created, even if the sixth consciousness wants to change the world, it may not happen right away. Nevertheless, big changes can still be brought on by long-term meditation practice.

Some may ask that according to *Abhidharmakosa*, all phenomena are caused by karmic force or are manifestations of karmic force. Is karmic force the creator of the world?

Karmic force is also created by our minds. There is no karma without a mind.

When learning the theory of Madhyamaka, one needs to observe the external world, such as the five aggregates, the twelve sense bases, the eighteen elements, etc., which include conditioned and unconditioned phenomena, that is, all that

which is known in the world.

‘That which is known,’ a Buddhist terminology, covers a wide range of things including matter, mind, and the movement of matter and mind. All that our minds can perceive, ideas such as conditioned and unconditioned phenomena, nirvana, buddha, sentient beings, etc., are included. The ‘knowables’ are also creations of the mind.

Before realizing the external phenomena are one’s own creations, mind can also be tricked into thinking the world is something external and not related to oneself. As a result, one would chase the self-proclaimed wonderful goal, make decisions driven by karmic force leading to all sorts of good and bad karma being committed, and sink even deeper into the web of illusions, the same as how a silkworm locks itself in a self-made silk cocoon. We impute the existence of a world which originally is non-existent to personal experience derived from our own sense organs. Here, to “impute” means something is not existent objectively, but the mind makes something out of nothing. We develop strong attachment to things we create ourselves because we don’t know the world is our own creation, just like how we take a dream for real while in the dream.

Thirdly, when mind discovers the world is not discrete, but an illusion created by itself, it will destroy the illusion, that is, the world.

Mind is in samsara when creating the world; it is creating karma, that is, creating the cause of samsara when perceiving the world; it is on the way to liberation when destroying the world.

By way of hearing, pondering, and meditating on the Dharma, mind begins to doubt, then recognizes its previous mistakes. Afterward, mind attains realization of the illusory nature of the world and sets out to destroy this illusive world.

The whole process is conducted by the mind. It is the mind that is hearing the Dharma, pondering the questions, and undertaking meditation.

Without examination, we think humans share one common world, but the fact is this is just a mixture of many similar feelings, not a singular whole. The Buddhist view is that because of shared karma, we all see the world today in the same way. But it is not really one unity, just similar. We all have our own world; if we destroy it, we are free. If we fail to attain freedom, our own world lives on indefinitely.

We should try to destroy illusions after attaining realization. Besides the mind, even the Big Bang or the so-called apocalypse cannot destroy the world, because when the old one ends, the new one will be born. However, the power of the mind can destroy the world instantly and effortlessly.

2. The nature of mind is emptiness

If the solar system, the Milky Way, and the boundless universe are all created by the mind, what does this mighty mind look like? According to the viewpoint of Madhyamaka, the essence of mind is devoid of fabrication, its nature vast and infinite.

When Madhyamaka explicates the concept of “no-self,” especially about “no-self in phenomena,” it says the mind inside

and the world outside are all emptiness. The existence of a physical world from mountains to rivers, emotions of joy and sorrow, even a particle, is not acknowledged.

From the point of view of Madhyamaka, our minds arise and cease every moment, stopping not even for one millionth or ten millionth of a second. If we take ten millionth of a second as the present, the mind before this is already gone like last night's dream, and the mind after this is not yet born; neither exists. That leaves only the present. The so-called present may last just an unimaginably short time, perhaps ten millionth of a second or even shorter, and it can be further divided down to nothing at the end.

If mind itself doesn't exist, what world can it perceive? We realize at this point our suffering, happiness, family, enemies, ideas of good and evil, etc. are all built on a base that never existed. Now the world will begin to crumble, and mind becomes the one that destroys the world.

In the macro world or in terms of relative truth, there is suffering and happiness. But in the micro world, mind lasts too short a time to bring any sense of happiness or suffering.

The so-called suffering and happiness are considered phenomena of dependent arising in Buddhism; they are completely illusory.

Those who have learned Madhyamaka know the mind cannot truly feel happiness, because when two things exist simultaneously, there can be no connection between them. From the macroscopic perspective, the left hand can touch the

right hand, but this is only an illusion. If mind and happiness exist sequentially, when the former exists, the latter has not yet arisen; after the latter arises, the former no longer exists. As there is no connection between the two, how can mind feel happiness? The so-called feeling is a misconception derived from the sense perception.

Both logic and psychology consider reason superior to sense perception because reason is sensible. However, in Buddhist logic, perception is superior to reason in the realm of direct perception because logical reasoning is based on information provided by perception. If the perception is not reliable, reason is without its base, like being led by the blind.

From time immemorial, we have always thought the world is something external which we sometimes fear, other times yearn for; we are either lost or engrossed in this world, a world we never knew created by ourselves before we heard the teaching of prajnaparamita. Not until life nears its end do we finally realize there is nothing meaningful in this world. This is the delusion and regret of ordinary people.

The fact is all these are just like a dream: We created everything in the dream. Out of fear or want, we commit evil deeds such as killing, stealing, lying, etc. as well as virtuous deeds like the practice of bodhicitta and the six paramitas. We tend to suffer or lose hope if we fail to obtain the good things in the dream; for fear of running into even bigger suffering, we try everything we can to crush all possible causes for pain. But this is just a dream; there is neither anything to chase after nor to avoid because all is mind's creation.

Taming the mind as a wild elephant

Mipham Rinpoche then asked, “From time immemorial until now, haven’t we suffered enough? Are we not fed up?”

Mind is creating the world as well as happiness and suffering. If we don’t tame the mind by force, it will affect us life after life.

Except those practitioners who have transcended suffering and happiness, our whole life’s work can be summed up as seeking happiness and avoiding suffering.

We believe all happiness comes from perfectly beautiful things, all suffering from poor, defective things. Our mind draws the line between perfection and imperfection, but such distinction does not exist objectively. Once our mind is fixated on an object or a person, we wishfully think that must be perfect, devoid of any fault. This is how desire causes delusion, and delusion conceals the truth. When mind hastens to grasp at the mere stirring from outside, no force, not even the force of one thousand elephants, is strong enough to make it turn back.

For example, we may all wish to be perfect. If someone points out our shortcoming, we may see it as an insult and become angry instantly. At this point, not even one thousand elephants have the strength to stop this anger. But words themselves are mere sound waves being transmitted from the other person’s mouth to our ears. Why should we be bothered so much?

It is the same with a person. If we love someone whom others deem unworthy, we will only think they are jealous or

have an ulterior motive.

There is no commonly recognized standard to judge what is good or bad. Everyone is entitled to his or her own view—a good person is when I say he or she is good, and vice versa; something is pretty when I think it is pretty, ugly when I think it is ugly. One’s mind creates one’s own view on beauty and values.

The way people think is like the tip of grass which swings to the right when the wind blows right, to the left when the wind blows left. Each one will do whatever appeals to him or her the most, be it gathering wealth or practicing altruism.

Since time immemorial, the world created by our mind has been changing constantly, but we have yet been able to go beyond it. Besides the unruly mind, nothing else from the physical side such as brain, internal organs, blood circulation, breath, and so on is powerful enough to take us to samsara because these lack the characteristic of mind. The essence of the world cannot be changed back and forth even with all the money from the national treasury or all the weapons in the world. This is the unique power of the mind.

Mind is unfathomable, having both positive and negative capacity. It allows us to be reborn in the relatively pure world like the realm of celestial beings as well as in the impure saha world, even hell. But once realization is attained, one can easily change the world into pure phenomena, even being non-existent at all.

These concepts are too profound and too different. If one were to discuss this with certain groups of people, one would

likely be seen as abnormal. If these ideas were presented to a relatively more mature group of people, some may think these ideas make some sense and consider them seriously; yet in another group, these ideas may fit exactly with what people have in mind. This is the outward display of mind's varied levels of maturity.

Because the power of the mind surpasses all other powers in the world, we must make it do the right thing. If it continues to make one mistake after another, we will have no hope in the future. As it is said in Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, "What else is there to do besides taming the mind?"

Saraha, one of the greatest among the eighty maha-siddhas of India, was also the vajra master of Nagarjuna. He once sang, "Samsara arises from the mind, so does nirvana; mind is like the wish-fulfilling jewel, pay homage to this jeweled mind." There is nothing in the world that exceeds the mind. Before we set out to practice meditation, mind is easily led astray by the material things outside; it is weak for lack of the right view and awareness. Its tremendous internal power is not released.

Buddhism also places importance on charity works because they can relieve the difficult conditions in life for some people, but they provide no solution to the fundamental questions of birth, old age, sickness, and death. Compared to doing charity, it is far more meaningful to let people know the truth of life and the world so that all can take the path to liberation. For this reason, Buddhist training emphasizes more on hearing, pondering, and meditating on the Dharma to beginners.

The nine vehicles of the Nyingma school are like a flight of

stairs. As one takes each stair up, there will be new discoveries and gains. At the level of mahayoga, external mandala and offerings are still important; the next level of anuyoga emphasizes not the external mandala, only the internal mandala; then atiyoga focuses just on the mind, as mind is already the mandala of the buddha while the body is merely a projection of mind and an illusion. The most critical is still the mind.

Any Buddhist study, practice or activity is meaningful and especially virtuous so long as it can transform the mind; if it is not related to transforming the mind, it is not as important, even though it is a good deed. Because that which rules the world is mind, when mind is not pure, the world is not pure. The reason one's practice has not seen any qualitative change is not because of insufficient recitations of sutras or the quantities of lives being released. It is because the mind has not been trained adequately.

The path to enlightenment – different means, same destination

From Theravada to Mahayana and from exoteric to esoteric Buddhism, the Buddha delivered sentient beings in a way that was never dogmatic but varied according to each one's capacity and suitable conditions.

When the Buddha observed some people were receptive only to the view that the world is made of matter, he would not reject this view immediately; instead, he would offer some methods of observation so that gradually people would realize external physical phenomena do not really exist.

To another type of people who were more receptive to the idea that all phenomena are mind, not matter, the Buddha did not emphasize whether the world outside is matter but expounded on Yogacara theory which then served as the basis for them to practice emptiness and enter the state of emptiness.

Considering people's varied capacity, the Buddha also taught three different ways to attain realization: first, Madhyamaka reasoning to establish the nature of mind is emptiness; second, the tantric practice of channels and winds; third, Dzogchen and Mahamudra practices in Tibetan Buddhism and Ch'an practice in Chinese Buddhism. The same goal can be reached by different means.

One of the tantric practices is the following: for a start, practitioner should not examine anything outside, just ponder the point that mind—the creator, perceiver, and the destroyer of all phenomena—rules the world. The external environment and the internal emotions are created by the mind; all are illusions of the mind. Then what in fact is this thing that creates all phenomena? What is the essence of mind, the ruler of the world? At this point, there is no need to follow or observe the externalities; just examine the nature of mind and abide in that state. Here, the methods are aplenty, such as the Dzogchen practice relying on the teacher's pith instructions, or practices based on the reasoning in Madhyamaka.

It is stated many times in the teachings of *Longchen Nyingtik*, such as Longchenpa's *The Seven Treasuries*, that the external world is not mind, not mental phenomena.

Jigme Linpa mentioned in the Dzogchen practices, "Now

I know why external phenomena are not recognized as mind in *Longchen Nyingtik*." Like Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka, it offers no definite view on whether external phenomena are mental or material. Rather, it just follows the conclusion derived from the senses. Our eyes, ears, nose, etc. perceive things, but it is up to the sixth consciousness to decide later if they are matter or not. What are perceived at the very moment of seeing or hearing are just superficial phenomena. Based on recognizing these as mere phenomena, Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka proceeds to refute all attachment. Likewise, it is also the view of *Longchen Nyingtik* that the external world is an illusion, neither mind nor matter. Once it is determined the world is illusory, there is no need to conduct the many examinations and debates in exoteric Buddhism regarding this question.

When practicing Dzogchen, the teacher will first tell the disciples the world is created by the mind, then ask the disciples to contemplate the question: Is matter or mind the most important in the world? And report back to the teacher afterwards.

Dzogchen practitioners of the Pith Instruction class do not classify the essence of the world into twelve sense bases (ayatana), eighteen elements (dhatus), matter, mind, etc. Instead, all perceived objects are subsumed into an illusion created by the mind. This way, when the empty nature of mind is realized, the nature of all phenomena is also realized. No further investigation is necessary. This is their pith instruction.

Because the nature of mind is inconceivable and inexplicable, realization of mind's nature needs no logical reasoning, only the practice of Guru Yoga. At the end of the

practice, when the lama merges into our mind which then becomes one with the lama's wisdom, abide in this state. If there is strong faith in the lama and the Three Jewels, and the preliminary practices are well completed, it is possible to attain realization of emptiness in the abiding state.

Relative to the pointing-out instruction of Dzogchen, the preliminary practices such as the preciousness of human birth or impermanence are not considered the ultimate view. If it is already determined the world is essentially illusory, there is no need to examine impermanence of the natural world, albeit impermanence of the natural world and the sentient world is to be contemplated in the preliminary practice. Practitioners with superior capacity can just rely on the teacher's pith instructions to practice without having to take a detour to ponder on impermanence. However nowadays, almost no one can enter the state of Dzogchen directly, so some detour is unavoidable.

It is no longer necessary to observe the external world if the viewpoint mentioned above is firmly established. But to most people with strong attachment to the solid existence of this world, observation is still a must. We have strong attachment to the realness of the world outside because we think the world is material. Buddhadharma, on the other hand, offers ways to counter such attachment by way of analyzing all there is in the external world and ultimately establishing the truth that all is emptiness.

Meditation is premised on hearing and pondering the Dharma. After a certain time, meditation should be practiced concurrently with hearing and pondering the Dharma teachings. Then gradually increase the effort spent on meditation and

eventually exceed that of hearing and pondering. This is necessary because Buddhadharma is too vast and profound, we cannot possibly learn everything within this lifetime. Absent meditation, all the theories and viewpoints we have learned will not be enough to help us at the most crucial moment.

In terms of eliminating defilement, there is no difference between those who know theoretically all external objects are illusions of the mind and those who know nothing about; they all still have greed, anger, and delusion which cannot be removed simply by immersing oneself in hearing and pondering the Dharma theories. The world still looks very real when actual practice is missing. From the point of view of planting virtuous root, it is still a great merit to just hear the teaching of emptiness, even with a bit of reasonable doubt, and be able to end samsara in the future. However, from the standpoint of eradicating defilement, the effect is minimal.

The result of practice

Realization of emptiness is like the pinnacle of a pyramid; outer and inner preliminary practices are at the bottom of the pyramid; Yogacara and Madhyamaka the lower middle part; tantric practices like *Guhyagarbha Tantra* the upper middle part; Dzogchen the top part of the pyramid.

Before examination, we think mind is a carrier; after examination, mind as a carrier of the world cannot be found anywhere. It is like when a bowl is broken, the food in the bowl is also gone. When realization of the true nature of mind (Dzogchen) is attained, one may exclaim, even with laughter or tears, "So this is how the world really is!" Attaining realization is thus.

The state of realization cannot really be described. This is all we can say before attaining realization. Having attained realization, every word in this text can engender strong feelings and resonate with one's own experience; its many-fold meanings will then be known. Because the state of realization is indescribable, for us who have not gained realization, we can only try to experience that state literally from the words.

It is often stated in the Theravada texts that it makes no difference to an arhat whether to bathe his right side with sandalwood infused water or to cut his left side with a sharp knife – he neither covets the sandalwood water nor abhors the knife because afflictions of desire and anger have been completely eradicated from his mind. If an arhat can achieve such a state, all the more so with buddhas and bodhisattvas.

A bodhisattva does not treat someone who beats him or abuses him with vile words as an enemy, nor treat someone who gives complements or shows extreme deference to him as a close friend. The external objects are different, but there is no difference in reaction because the mind stays still.

To an enlightened person, the past, such as the 4.5 billion years of the history of Earth, is like history in a dream because there is no actual place of Earth's coming and going. As all phenomena arise according to cause and condition, when the right cause and condition come together, the universe, the Milky Way, the solar system, and Earth will all manifest in the sky. However, these are all just illusions – there is no real past, no real future either.

Sentient beings, not knowing the essential nature of the

world, let alone the luminous nature of mind, are thus very much attached to this world. Under the sway of ignorance, not even our luminous mind can free us from samsara. We ordinary people will still wander in the cycle of existence and remain in a bad dream of samsara.

People often ask if all is emptiness, neither sentient beings nor buddhas exist, for whom should bodhicitta be aroused, loving-kindness and compassion be generated?

Nagarjuna once said great compassion will naturally arise and grow, not weaken, after attaining realization of emptiness. Because sentient beings don't know the nature of all phenomena is emptiness, they commit tremendous karma to seek "real happiness" and escape from "real suffering" in this self-made real world, which in turn leads to endless cyclic existence and great suffering.

After buddhas and bodhisattvas attain realization of emptiness, they discover sentient beings, suffering, and samsara do not actually exist. Nevertheless, sentient beings believe samsara is very real, so buddhas and bodhisattvas engender an uncontrollable compassion toward the illusion-like sentient beings and keep considering the best way to deliver them from samsara.

The way of a bodhisattva is to manifest an illusory body in an illusory world to free illusory sentient beings from suffering. Nirvana in Mahayana Buddhism is one that does not fall into the two extremes. One extreme is getting stuck in samsara like sentient beings who involuntarily remain in cyclic existence due to their defilement and ignorance; the other extreme is

only seeking nirvana like arhats of the Lesser Vehicle who have transcended samsara but are unwilling to return to samsara to help free sentient beings. Bodhisattvas can avoid these two extremes with their renunciation and bodhicitta.

Mahayana Buddhism also recommends acts of charity which can alleviate suffering and bring joy and happiness to sentient beings temporarily. But the most crucial is to explicate the ideas of no-self, emptiness, and the Four Noble Truths to sentient beings so that they understand the world is not real – it is their own creation. Only this realization can help sentient beings eliminate suffering completely and wake up from the long dream of samsara.

Attachment to self will be quashed and all questions resolved following the attainment of realization of emptiness. Foremost, how the buddhas and bodhisattvas help sentient beings is not by supernatural power or charitable donations but by a special type of education that teaches the way to leave samsara. This is the reason why the Buddha turned the wheel of Dharma three times in some forty years.

Practice of emptiness, the most important

Ignorance commands great power. It deludes us not only in this lifetime but also in every lifetime and keeps us trapped in cyclic existence.

All that we have gone through since birth, be they joy, anger, sadness, or happiness, are like dreams from last night. Every person is a stand-alone entity, comes alone and will leave alone as well. Therefore, the one thing we must do is to strive

for self-reliance, and the best way to strengthen the mind is through meditation practice.

Although money is needed for our survival, it can never serve as a mental support for us. The real master of the world is mind. As long as mind is strong, there is no difficulty that we cannot overcome. Realization of emptiness represents the ultimate strength. When the power of mind reaches its peak, buddhahood is attained, as all afflictions of greed, anger, and delusion are rendered powerless then.

Greed, anger, and delusion do not come from outside; they are mind's ideas and attachment. If mind stops grasping, no external objects, even if they are real, can cause greed, anger, and delusion in us, and vice versa.

Just like when under poor light, one may take a rope for a snake. Our sixth consciousness perceives the rope to be a snake even though it is not. Because of our attachment to the rope as a snake, the fear of seeing a snake naturally follows; this fear is as great as seeing a real snake.

While in samsara, we work hard to avoid suffering and enjoy some happiness in life. But we don't just try hard to manage worldly matters, we also forgo many mundane pleasures to conduct virtuous practices such as staying up late to recite mantras or to meditate, making offering to the sublime, giving to the needy, and so forth. Nonetheless, Mipham Rinpoche dampened our spirits by stating in the text that there can be no real happiness before attachment to self is abolished, no matter how many tasks one undertakes or how much effort is made. Instead, one should give up performing virtuous deeds without

inner awareness as they are virtuous only on the surface, and focus all attention on hearing, pondering, and meditating on the Dharma for the sole purpose of removing attachment to self. When attachment to self is destroyed, real happiness and freedom will follow. This is the only way to attain liberation.

It is like when dreaming of a flood, the best way for flood relief in the dream is not to run around building an embankment but to find ways to wake up from the dream. The Buddha realized this and turned the wheel of the Dharma to teach that emptiness is the true nature of the world, to wake us up from the samsaric dream. Accumulating worldly merit through good deeds, just like building an embankment in the dream, cannot resolve the fundamental question, no matter how much charitable work is done.

Ignorance and wisdom are like darkness and light; they are opposite and contradictory. The world is formed as such because we used to have only ignorance. But the world looks so real to our senses. Can the practice of Dharma make it disappear? The answer is yes. No matter how big the world is, it is still within the boundary of the five senses. Once ignorance of the five senses is eliminated, the world as it stands will no longer exist or be transformed into a pure world.

Therefore, Mipham Rinpoche said there is nothing more important than the practice of emptiness. Regarding the practice, one should ponder just two points: all phenomena are creations of the mind, and the nature of mind is emptiness. Nothing else.

It is important not to take the wrong path when learning

the Buddhadharmā, that is, to learn and to seek the wisdom of Buddha Sakyamuni. Even if realization of emptiness arises for just a moment, it also signifies learning the Buddhadharmā in the real sense. Just doing worldly good deeds to acquire worldly returns is not considered learning the Buddhadharmā nor is it the core of Buddhism.

Renunciation, bodhicitta, and realization of emptiness represent the core of Buddhism. Among them, the most crucial is realization of prajnaparamita, the nature of mind.

We should not take scriptures such as *The Heart Sutra*, *The Diamond Sutra*, *Prajñāpāramitā in 100,000 Verses* as the transcendental wisdom itself; these are called the verbal prajnaparamita. The real essence of prajnaparamita is the nature of mind. In the exoteric texts of the second turning of the wheel of Dharma, the nature of mind is called emptiness; in the texts of the third turning of the wheel of Dharma, the nature of mind is luminosity, or luminous mind; in Buddhist tantra, emptiness of the second turning and luminosity of the third turning of the wheel of Dharma are combined into an inseparable unity called ground, as in ground, path, fruition, or ground tantra. Ground means the foundation which has existed since beginningless time; it is the foundation of all pure and impure phenomena, because all phenomena manifest from our minds. The union of luminosity and emptiness is the most sublime path in Buddhadharmā. Although luminosity and emptiness can be separately expressed in speech and writing, in fact luminosity is emptiness, emptiness is luminosity; the two are inseparable. The root of all phenomena is this inconceivable state wherein our world abides, and whence vanishes as well.

From the standpoint of luminosity, the nature of mind has neither cognitive nor afflictive obscurations. All the obscurations and thoughts arise unexpectedly; they are not part of the nature of mind. The nature of mind, like empty space, is always luminous, pure, clear, inconceivable, and inexpressible. This is the best we can describe in words and conceptualize in thoughts. As ordinary people, our words and thoughts can never break the confines of the four extremes: existence, non-existence, both existence and non-existence, neither existence nor non-existence. All concepts, negative emotions, and various odd views are born from the four extremes. It is why Nagarjuna never asserted anything in all his writings on the Middle Way because the nature of mind cannot be found within the boundary of the four extremes; any one of the four extremes is a mistake, a fabrication, not reality. The four extremes will be completely overturned upon attaining genuine realization. Such destruction is not to establish a new point of view or the fifth extreme but to break all points of view.

The universe, the daily life, the horrible hell, and the pure land that everyone so yearns for all manifest from, not exist in, the inexpressible, inconceivable state of luminosity. Like images of people and sceneries in a movie that appear on the silver screen, besides the images on the screen, there is nothing else. Or like the buildings appearing in a dream, they don't exist in the dream. Because things in dreams don't really exist; they are just illusions. After attaining realization of the nature of mind, all external objects are manifestations in the inconceivable, inexpressible state of emptiness, having no real existence at all under close observation.

To those who have not gained any realization, all of these words may sound farfetched. One can only grasp their true meaning after realization is attained. By attaining realization, one will naturally possess the merit of enlightenment, that is, the merit of a buddha. From the standpoint of the shentong (other-emptiness) tradition of Madhyamaka, the merit of dharmakaya, the truth body of the buddha, is already in the nature of our mind and is indestructible; there is no need to look for it. We do not see it only because we are blinded by defilement. With realization of emptiness to eliminate all defilement, the merit of dharmakaya inherently existing in our basic nature will then manifest. This is the attainment of buddhahood.

The Process of Taming the Mind

This subject is a key instruction from Mipham Rinpoche.

We need to know the process of taming the mind because there are many difficulties at the beginning of practicing the Dharma. If we don't know what lies ahead on the path or how to cope when running into problems, we may end up feeling defeated, disappointed, and indolent to the point of even giving up the practice altogether. This is a concise but thorough teaching from Mipham Rinpoche.

Summary

The key to all Mahayana practices can be summed up roughly in two essentials:

First, things in the external, material world and various internal feelings are all phenomena of mind, illusions created by the mind. Other than the illusions produced by the eight consciousnesses, there is no real samsara. The gods and semi-gods of the higher realm, the hell beings and ghosts of the lower realm, are also illusions of mind; besides these illusions, the six realms of sentient beings do not exist.

Second, mind itself is also empty. Although it is not specifically stated in Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhamakakarika* (*The*

Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way) and Chandrakirti's *Madhyamakavatara (Introduction to the Middle Way)* that the external world is a projection of the internal world, the disciples of the two masters acknowledged all external objects are phenomena of mind in their subsequent writings about the process and actual practice of the Middle Way. Normally we can examine the twelve sense bases (*ayanatas*), the eighteen elements (*dhatas*), and so forth, and determine they are all emptiness, but such examinations are unnecessary when undertaking actual practice. We just need to know that all external phenomena are products of mind, then observe the nature of mind directly. Once the nature of mind is known, so is the nature of all things.

According to Mipham Rinpoche, these two essentials encompass all the pith instructions of sutra, tantra, and even Dzogchen. Thus, Buddhists only fight with their own mind, not with heaven or earth, nor with other people. The central question to learning the Dharma is how to tame the mind and ultimately realize emptiness.

There are two pith instructions regarding how to tame the mind. First, attain realization of emptiness as the nature of mind, then abide in this state of emptiness. Mipham Rinpoche said these two contain all the pith instructions.

The process of taming the mind consists of four stages:

1. Resisting – At first, mind wants to resist our demands, to act on its own.
2. Weakening – Although mind continues to resist, it has already lost its power.

3. Cooperating – At this stage, mind has basically been tamed and will do what we command. That is, if we ask mind to practice impermanence or emptiness, it will do so accordingly.

4. Self-liberating – Finally, mind enters the state of Dzogchen.

Classifications of meditation (Chan)

There are explanations regarding the classifications of meditation in the six paramitas, but there is also an unofficial way to classify meditation into three types:

Meditation with thoughts

Some may ask, “Shouldn’t meditation be conducted with calm, without any discursive thoughts? Is it still meditation if thoughts are employed?” Yes, it is, because the attention is focused on just one point of thought, not a myriad of thoughts.

The Chinese word Chan is a transliteration of *dhyana* (Sanskrit, meaning meditation) which refers to the tranquil state of mind. It can be explained in both a broad and narrow sense. Broadly speaking, the practice of both the outer and inner preliminaries is Chan.

Meditation without thoughts

There are two types of meditation without thoughts. The type here is merely stilling the mind – there is no realization of emptiness. It is a narrow definition of meditation – the four/eight stages of concentration (*jhanas*), which is not specific to Buddhism; non-Buddhists and atheists can also undertake this

practice, albeit with different purposes. If people with light symptoms of mental disorder practice meditative concentration before going to bed every night, they can gradually reduce stress and fully recover.

The meditation practice of Sutrayana is described clearly in both *Abhidharmakosa* and *Mahayana Abhidharma*. The practice, simply put, is to let go of the conceptual mind completely, then observe mind itself. While matter cannot perceive itself, mind can not only analyze, observe, and judge the external objects but also perceive its own condition. This is a unique characteristic of mind, also called the reflexive self-awareness of mind.

Meditation without thoughts but with realization of emptiness

Meditators abide in the state of realization of emptiness with no thought whatsoever.

The four stages of meditation

Resisting

Indeed, it is hard when first starting to practice the Dharma because mind tends to resist and fight the changes that come with the practice. When mind is asked to generate renunciation, instead of getting weary of the material world, it becomes greedier; when asked to develop compassion or bodhicitta, rather than striving to do so, it becomes even more selfish and unkind; with weak faith in the Buddhadharmā, mind is entangled in huge waves of greed, hatred, delusion, pride, etc., which is incompatible with the path to liberation. It is groggy sometimes and distracted other times. As our ability to meditate is still quite weak, our minds, like a piece of paper in the wind,

are at the mercy of negative emotions. No matter how we try, we cannot overcome the constant attacks from these afflictions, resulting in verbal or physical harm to others in the end. This is the most painful stage for practitioners.

But we must know this stage is only temporary, one that all regular practitioners must go through. And it will pass over time. If one practices well in a retreat, it will take just six months to overcome this hurdle. However, if one chooses to avoid facing this stage, one can never cross this hurdle, nor practice meditation or attain enlightenment.

In general, there are two obstacles to practicing meditation: external obstacles such as various difficulties in life and at work; internal obstacles such as health problems. But these are not the most serious. The biggest obstacle to all meditations is discursive thoughts and emotions.

On the surface, we cannot say all illnesses are caused by emotions. It is also stated in *Abhidharmakosa* that body and mind have two different attributes; they are classified separately in the five aggregates. However, at a deeper level, all illnesses and pain are created by the mind; other than the mind, the so-called illness and misery don't exist.

In fact, the nature of the four maras in Buddhism is our jumbled thoughts, or a type of phenomena produced by our destructive emotions. Except for emotions and illusions, there are no ghosts or demons out there.

For example, when yogis practice the kusali chöd, dreadful images of ghosts, demons, beasts, etc. will appear to them. These phenomena do not really exist, just illusions created by the mind.

If we don't know this is a path we must go through, that all are manifestations of the mind, we can still find it hard and unbearable to face even if we have garnered some merit from our practice. Sufficient courage is needed to face this situation.

Just as with an illness, however difficult or painful it may be, we are willing to pay for the treatment and accept the pain to regain our health. So we must accept the difficult challenge at present for liberation in the future.

There are many ways to gradually tame the mind, such as the practice of the preliminaries, the practice of generation stage to gain samadhi, and so on.

Weakening

After six months of battling the mind, a practitioner can gain some strength from meditation when discursive thoughts exert less influence. At this point, there are still various thoughts and afflictions, but they are not as strong as before and do not affect the practitioner as much. In any case, thoughts, like an army created by a magician, cannot cause any real harm. So long as one knows they are illusory, they will just disappear by themselves. When a negative emotion arises, one no longer needs to fight it with much effort; just rest a bit and it will go away on its own.

Negative emotions and discursive thoughts at this stage are likened to a spring breeze which can never be as biting cold as the wind in winter, no matter how strongly it blows. As one has tasted the first victory in this battle with mind, one begins to have more interest and faith in meditation practice.

Does it mean one has attained the first bhumi on the bodhisattva path at this stage? No, it is not even sure if this qualifies as entering the path of joining. If realization of emptiness is attained, it can then be deemed the path of joining; otherwise, it is normally classified as the path of accumulation.

There are two reasons for the power of discursive thoughts to subside. One is realization of emptiness – realize that all thoughts are illusory. The other one is being able to abide in meditative concentration for a longer time so that discursive thoughts do not arise; and even if they do arise occasionally, they are powerless.

Cooperating

At this stage, discursive thoughts are still around but they co-exist with our minds peacefully. Not only do they not disturb our meditation, but they become supporting conditions for the practice of renunciation and bodhicitta. It is as if mind has become an obedient servant who will do what we command without any resistance. Like a gentle spring breeze passing through, it leaves no trace and causes no harm. Now we can say we have conquered our minds, which also means we have conquered all the trillions of universes. Once reaching this state, practitioners are filled with great joy; meditation is no longer a chore but an enjoyment.

At this point, discursive thoughts are necessary for the generation of renunciation and bodhicitta. Absent these thoughts, mind can be very quiet, but it may fall into the second type of meditation mentioned above, that is, without realization of emptiness, which possibly has no connection to liberation.

Self-liberating

Although there are still thoughts, practitioners having realized emptiness can instantly perceive the empty nature of thoughts the moment they arise. Thoughts cease as soon as they are produced before any karmic actions are committed.

Generally, thoughts also disappear for two reasons: one, all conditioned phenomena cannot possibly remain at the second, third, or fourth moment, as impermanence is the natural law of all phenomena; two, when a thought, however subtle, crosses the mind and a person (even an ordinary person who has never practiced Dzogchen, tantra, or Madhyamaka) tries to perceive the nature of the thought, it will stop automatically. But neither of the two denotes the stage of self-liberating.

The so-called self-liberating means the mind having realized emptiness has severed the root of its existence – attachment. Herein, thoughts and awareness of emptiness (also called relative truth and ultimate truth) are inseparable, one and the same. Although only the eighth bhumi bodhisattvas can perceive the two truths as truly inseparable, a similar experience can be obtained at this stage. This state of realization is normally considered that of Mahamudra or perhaps the lowest level of Dzogchen, not quite the pinnacle of Dzogchen realization.

When impure thoughts disappear, the true face of mind – the buddha’s mandala – will reveal itself; this is also an inherent function of the mind. Attachment manifests impure samsara; enlightenment manifests the buddha’s mandala. Upon entering the state of buddhahood, neither pure nor impure phenomena exist, only the luminous and empty nature of mind is spontaneously

present. This is called the primordial mind.

Most of the time “mind” denotes the eight types of consciousness, including the alaya consciousness, but “primordial mind” means luminous mind which refers to mother luminosity in tantra. The ultimate attainment of Chan Buddhism is “knowing the mind and seeing the nature.” Here, “mind” and “primordial mind” are different. In this case, “mind” denotes child luminosity; “nature” denotes buddha-nature, luminous mind, primordial mind, the nature of mind, all of which represent mother luminosity in tantra.

In fact, the nature of mind never changes in the four stages of meditation. For example, in the first stage, mind is full of various thoughts, but its nature remains pure and luminous; in the second stage, as progress is made, child luminosity which belongs to the truth of the path (of the Four Noble Truths) becomes more distinct, while mother luminosity which belongs to the truth of the cessation of suffering remains unchanged, eternally stable. A practitioner finally enters the state of mother luminosity through child luminosity, that is, enters the end of suffering through the path that leads to the end of suffering. At this point, one realizes one’s intrinsic nature never changes. There are four different stages that one goes through in meditation practice, but that is just what appears on the surface. From the point of view of buddha nature, the intrinsic nature of a first bhumi bodhisattva and that of an ordinary person at his or her most confused stage are one and the same, unaltered forever.

Dzogchen uses very direct methods to attain realization, but like Chan Buddhism, it may not be suitable for all practitioners, only those endowed with related capacity can practice Dzogchen.

How to ripen one's capacity? There are people born with matured capacity, but not many; most people need to undertake the outer and inner preliminary practices step by step in this life until their minds are transformed. Then they are ready for Dzogchen. With practice, one can enter the state of Dzogchen at last. This is attaining buddhahood.

The Practice of Emptiness

Overview

Why do we need to talk about no-self in person and no-self in phenomena? In the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha expounded a “path” which consists of “renunciation, bodhicitta and emptiness (the wisdom of realizing emptiness).” We have explained the importance of renunciation and bodhicitta in other teachings. Here we shall describe the practice of emptiness.

Before completing the practice of renunciation, there is no need to talk about the practice of bodhicitta; likewise, before completing the practice of bodhicitta, there is no need to talk about the practice of emptiness. In other words, we should first explain the practice of renunciation, next put it into practice; after most people have reached a certain level in this practice, we can then explain the practice of bodhicitta; this way of undertaking one practice at a time is most appropriate and reliable. However, due to time constraints, we have occasionally given teachings on many practices in a very short period of time. When practicing, you should not take on many practices in a day or in a session; you should first cultivate renunciation – reduce your desire for worldly goods and pleasures – before moving on to the practice of bodhicitta.

After cultivating renunciation and bodhicitta, we must eventually realize emptiness to complete the path to liberation. The fundamental nature of our mind is untainted by desire, anger and delusion; it is the clear light mind of the tathagata. In this state of mind, we can attain freedom and spontaneity; but there is something that will always prevent us from being free. This thing is not outside, as no matter or spirit outside can bind us to samsara or stop us from attaining liberation. In the past, many monastics were imprisoned but lived happily and freely; having attained liberation, it did not matter whether or not they were held in captivity. What keeps us from freedom and happiness is the subtle attachment we have in our own mind. This attachment binds our mind to samsara, that is, to our body, so tightly they cannot be separated. Although in death we forego our body in this lifetime, we still have a body in our next lifetime, not to mention in bardo. Thus, even if the fundamental nature of mind is clear light, we do not recognize it and cannot attain liberation as a result. Our mind has accompanied us since beginningless time, yet to date we are still blind to its true nature; without this understanding of reality, worldly knowledge, however much we may have, is meaningless. Consequently, we must sever this attachment which has always tied our body and mind together.

Just as a kite can fly freely in the sky when its string is broken, when we utilize methods to sever the attachment that links our body to mind, we can be like the buddhas and the bodhisattvas from the first ground up—no birth, aging, sickness and death; no desire, anger, delusion and arrogance; no limitations due to mental afflictions; no hindrances from things outside (benefitting oneself). In this state, we have even more ability to help sentient beings (benefitting others). There is no end to helping sentient beings; we practice and aspire to buddhahood with this purpose only.

How then do we sever this attachment that links our body to mind? If this attachment were outside, we would be able to eradicate it from outside, but it isn't. There are no methods on the outside that can eradicate this attachment. To people who have not yet realized emptiness, this may be somewhat difficult to comprehend; however, to those who understand and have experienced emptiness, this is quite normal, not the least bit mysterious. Once we realize emptiness, our afflictions at the coarse level will clearly diminish, even if our desire, anger and delusion are not entirely dispelled.

So the “object” is “self-attachment”; the “subject” is “realization” or “wisdom.” The object is that which we want to eradicate, the subject is the method used to eradicate the object.

To eradicate an affliction, we must first find the source of the affliction. In Buddhism, all secular and non-secular phenomena are defined by cause and result. To eliminate the result, we must find the cause. Only by locating the cause can we smash or destroy it. When the “cause” is destroyed, the “result” will naturally disappear. This is a very logical approach.

Some non-Buddhist practitioners do not seek to destroy “self-attachment”; rather they engage methods such as going without clothes or food and burning themselves to escape cyclic existence, as a kind of spiritual liberation. This practice can still be found in India today. Because they have not located the source of the problem, their solution is wrong. It is easy to destroy one's body. But this is only a temporary elimination of the result, not an elimination of its root cause; the result can reappear at any time. For instance, taking pain killers can suppress pain, but if we do not treat the basic illness that is causing the pain, the pain will

come back after the medication wears off. Likewise, if we do not resolve the basic cause of the problem, it is useless.

Are the buddhas and bodhisattvas the only ones who can resolve this problem? No, they have already cut off self-attachment and do not need to do so again, just as there is no need to kill a person who is already dead. It is precisely ordinary people like us with “attachment” who need to cut it off; moreover, there are methods. If you are willing to forego your worldly activities (though not completely) and exert effort in practice, however long or short, you can definitely let go of a lot of attachment in your lifetime. Had you devoted the same effort and time to practice that you did to your work and career, and utilized the correct method, you would have severed most of your attachment by now. Hence, this is something that everyone can do. It is not a matter of whether you can do it, but whether you want to do it. As long as you practice, you will succeed. Therefore, the practice of emptiness is really essential.

What is it that binds us? How do we cut it off?

Knowing the source of samsara

Why are we ordinary, unenlightened people wandering in samsara? The Creator did not plan this for us, nor are we in this state for “no reason.” Generally speaking, people are very unclear about their past life and future life; they only know about their present life. How life originates or where it ends is not an easy thing for us to understand; accordingly, many schools of thought and philosophers have emerged to address this question. Despite this, only the Buddha has been able to clearly reveal and promulgate the origin and destination of life itself.

What is it that binds us to samsara?

We do not transmigrate in samsara on our own will. As I have previously mentioned, some people under hypnosis say they intentionally come into this world. They may truly believe this or could be babbling. Regardless, this ought to be just their illusion. In fact, apart from the bodhisattvas who strive to deliver sentient beings, no person at the time of dying is able to dictate where he or she can take rebirth. We have been drifting aimlessly in cyclic existence with no freedom of any kind.

Nor is it anything on the outside that constrains us. People always think we are bound by circumstances outside – that we have to work and earn money in order to survive. Actually, the reason we feel this way is simply because everyone works to make a living, so we must do the same. In fact, there is nothing in this world that we are compelled to do; it’s all about letting go. As long as we think there are some things that must be achieved, we will never be able to let go.

There is just one thing that binds us to samsara. It is “self-attachment.”

With self-attachment comes desire, anger and delusion. The desire, anger, delusion, arrogance and envy that arise in our mind all originate in “self-attachment.” If there is no “self-attachment,” would desire or greed arise? Would anger arise? The answer is no, it would not be possible! The source of all mental afflictions is “self-attachment.” Likewise, external objects do not exist on their own but are a product of the mind.

As for the relationship between external objects and mind, or matter and mind, there are many interpretations. Some say

external objects are a product of the mind; others say mind is a product of matter. Actually, this problem is beyond the scope of our sense perceptions. Although scholars through the ages have postulated different views on this question, most of their assertions are wrong. They cannot give us a clear answer, since the problem is basically outside the boundary of our sense and mental consciousness.

What then is the nature of this relationship? Matter is a product of the mind, not the other way around. This point can be validated, not only by way of logic but also through the actual experience of many practitioners who preceded us.

If external objects are phenomena of the mind, what is “mind”? In relative reality, from the standpoint of ordinary people, “mind” is the source of all phenomena; in ultimate reality, from the perspective of emptiness, the “external objects” do not exist, neither does the “mind.” Since neither exist, why do we transmigrate in samsara? When mind is attached to the self, this attachment can first lead to the formation of mountains, rivers and vast expanses of land, then cause people to become confused and deluded, unable to attain realization. This is the power of a tainted or defiled mind, not that of the mind’s true nature.

We know now that the source of all mental afflictions and external objects is the “mind.” There are many kinds of mind, for instance, the luminous mind, also the mind which suddenly produces attachment. The luminous mind is not the source of cyclic existence, only the mind with attachment is the source of cyclic existence. Why is that? Because, as we have already seen, desire, anger and delusion arise from self-attachment; although we are not clear how external objects are produced by the mind,

we can establish external objects are phenomena of the mind through logic. In sum, all phenomena whether virtuous or non-virtuous are an attachment of the mind.

This so-called “attachment of the mind” is composed of two kinds: “attachment to self in person” and “attachment to self in phenomena.” All attachments fall within these two categories, there is no other kind of attachment. Thus, the source of cyclic existence is “attachment to self in person” and “attachment to self in phenomena.”

What is “attachment to self in person”? It is not something outside of oneself. Everyone believes in the existence of a “self”; this attachment to “self”—body and spirit combined—is inherent at birth, not instructed by our parents or teachers, or self-taught. What is “attachment to self in phenomena”? It is the attachment to the existence of all things that are outside our five skandas, such as mountains, rivers and land, buildings, money and so forth.

For example, if we think money exists, “attachment to self in phenomena” is produced; if we think “self” exists, “attachment to self in person” is produced. Since “self” and “money” both exist, a thought immediately arises in our mind: I want to make money. On this we should reflect: how do I look upon money and status? How do I regard myself? It is hard to find anyone who does not like money and status, only the extent to which we crave these things is different. Actually, “attachment to self in person” is not only inherent in all of us but also very strong. Why do we want to scramble for money? Specifically to enjoy the sensual pleasures in this world, that which we call happiness and well-being. If we can appreciate and realize that money, we ourselves, and sensual pleasures are like an illusion,

and fully recognize they are all empty, would we still seek this so-called happiness and chase after power and wealth? Of course not. Since everything is empty, what is there to fight over?

There is another point that cannot be overlooked: we must clearly understand the distinction between relative reality and ultimate reality. Without an understanding of these two truths, many people will misapprehend the concept of emptiness.

Why defeating attachment to self is essential

It is very important for us to know why “attachment to self in person” and “attachment to self in phenomena” must be defeated. Because they are the source of cyclic existence. Although some people are unwilling to endure suffering, they do not want to leave the cycle of life and death either; since they only want to enjoy human and celestial blessings in each life, it is not necessary to sever these two kinds of attachment. However, if we are unwilling to transmigrate in samsara, and hope to be free of the suffering of birth, aging, illness and death, we must overcome these two kinds of attachment. Liberation is otherwise not possible.

How to overcome the two kinds of attachment

As soon as we generate renunciation, we begin to distant ourselves from cyclic existence. At this point, we are still unable to transcend samsara because one of the prerequisites of liberation is realization of emptiness. The swiftest way toward liberation is to practice the teachings in tantra, in particular Mahamudra and Dzogchen. We can also follow the teachings in sutra, but it takes a longer time; this is evident when we compare the progress of practitioners in tantra and sutra. However, from the standpoint of

ordinary people, we need to first establish emptiness by way of the logic in Madhyamaka, then listen, contemplate, and practice Dzogchen, at which point the methods in Madhyamaka will be useful in realizing emptiness. Thus, to overcome our attachment, we have to rely first on the methods in Madhyamaka and eventually on the practices in tantra.

Propagating the excellence of Madhyamaka and the importance of practice

Although we can establish all phenomena are empty through the logic in Madhyamaka, the actual result depends on the strength of practice.

However, from another perspective, listening to the Madhyamaka teachings without practice is also meaningful. Why is that? It is said in the *Prajnaparamita Sutras*: the perpetuation of the cycle of life and death is damaged when a person has some understanding of emptiness. Although cyclic existence does not come to an immediate stop, its forward momentum has already been disrupted, so the person’s transmigration in samsara will not be for long. In other words, whether we practice or not, there is substantial benefit in just listening to “emptiness.”

The Buddha spoke of several analogies in the *Prajnaparamita Sutras*, among which there are two that I remember. In one analogy, Indian merchants in ancient times used to go out to sea to look for gems (most had to travel a great distance on land before reaching the sea). When the mountains started to fade away in the distance, and the plains came into sight, this was an indication the sea was not too far away (of course, this is only in certain places).

In another analogy, a person lost his way in the woods; after walking back and forth for a long while, he came upon a shepherd. This was an indication he was already at the edge of the forest, since a shepherd would only stay at the periphery and not venture deep into the forest.

Similarly, when a person comes upon the teachings on emptiness and on Prajnaparamita – like seeing the plains and knowing the sea is close by, or running into the shepherd and knowing it is the edge of the forest – this is an indication the person is already close to the edge of cyclic existence. Thus, from this perspective, hearing the teachings on emptiness is extremely useful, even if we do not realize it.

Nonetheless, from the standpoint of practice, just listening is not very useful, so we must practice! Before practicing, we need to realize emptiness, not the kind in Dzogchen and other tantras, but in Madhyamaka. By way of logical reasoning and concepts, we attain a very profound experience of emptiness called Madhyamaka realization. Whether one is a monastic or lay person, this is very important. Do we have to be a monastic to realize this kind of emptiness? Not necessarily. Anyone can attain this realization. As long as we practice after gaining realization, we can overcome “attachment to self.”

If “attachment to self” is not eradicated, it will take control over our lives and keep us in samsara indefinitely. People generally think the most terrifying thing in the world is to lose their lives; actually, death is just an end to a kind of transitory life – this lifetime only, it cannot cause us to descend into hell. We are often fearful of ghosts and evil spirits; actually, they only have the ability to make us temporarily sick, they cannot take us down

the path of hell. However, if we do not wage war against these two kinds of “attachment,” they will inflict injury on us life after life and cause us to take rebirth in the lower realms with no escape in sight. If we choose to defeat self-attachment now, it will gradually weaken and lose its power. Why will it lose its power? Because there is fundamentally no basis or rationale for these two kinds of “attachment.” Notwithstanding, we have lived with self-attachment for a very long time, so if we do not examine its fault, it will continue to bind us even if there is no basis for its existence. On examination, it is very easy to discover it is a mistake. Since we know it is a mistake, it is not hard to cut off.

Theoretically, our attachment is baseless and should be very easy to sever; however, completely overcoming self-attachment by way of practice in Madhyamaka is in fact not a simple matter; it is a slow process that takes time. This is because “attachment to self” is a habit that has followed us since beginningless time; to fully overcome it is indeed not easy.

In summation, knowing the source of cyclic existence is essential. We now understand we do not come into this world on our own free will, or in accordance with a divine plan; instead, we are propelled by a very powerful force. This powerful force is “attachment to self in person” and “attachment to self in phenomena”; now is the time for us to overcome these two kinds of attachment. This is very important.

Part I: The specific practice of no-self in person

The concept of self

People generally think a person is composed of body and mind; in Buddhist thought, the body and mind are broken down

into “five skandas.” The word “skanda” means to aggregate or lump together, so the five skandas are five different elements that sum up the whole of an individual’s mental and physical existence. The so-called “self in person” refers to an innate “self-attachment” to our body and mind, or the five skandas. One may ask: Who is this “self”? Who am I? We will point to our body and say, “This is who I am.” For instance, when our head hurts, we will say, “I am in pain”; when our leg hurts, we will also say, “I am in pain.” Regardless of where we feel pain, we will say, “My head (or leg) hurts” or “I am in pain”; the word “I” is always there. We not only say the word “I,” we also have “I” in our thoughts; it is because the mind carries this thought that we say what is in our mind.

In that case, what is the scope of this “self in person”? The scope of this self is our body and mind. We would never consider an external object—a house, car or appliance—to be “self”; only the body and mind are “self.” Some people believe our body is not “self” because we abandon our body at the time of death, but our mind is “self” since it perpetuates indefinitely.

The method of examining the self

How do we examine “self in person”? We can rely on the logic in *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* by Nagarjuna and *Introduction to the Middle Way* by Chandrakirti. Nagarjuna refuted the existence of a self through five kinds of reasoning; Chandrakirti added to this foundation by introducing two other kinds of reasoning. These seven types of reasoning in Madhyamaka are known as the “sevenfold reasoning of the chariot.” They are so called because in ancient times there were only chariots pulled by horses, no cars or trains. Why do we use a chariot as an analogy? Because the chariot and a human being

are constructed the same way. The chariot is also like a car, which consists of many parts; similarly, our body is composed of skin, bones, fluid and other “parts.” In the words of mechanistic materialism, a human being is just like a machine. Although they do not understand the mind, they are correct about certain aspects of the body. Nowadays, because everyone is familiar with a car, to call these seven types of reasoning the “sevenfold reasoning of the car” is most appropriate. With the car as an analogy, we can clearly see what is “self.” (Since many people do not understand the meaning of the five skandas, only the body and mind are mentioned here.)

Firstly, let us examine whether this “self” is mind, body, or a “composite.” Many people will say this “self” is a “composite” of body and mind. Looking back, we discover: if we only recognize the body as “self,” a lot of problems will arise, it is not correct; if we admit the body is not “self,” only the mind is “self,” it is not correct either, because when our head hurts, we will say, “I am in pain.” Therefore, many people say the “self” is a “composite” of body and mind.

Taking this investigation a step further, what is a “composite”? Can we find a “composite” of a car? Actually, the assembly of all the components of a car is a so-called “composite.” However, at the time the car is put together, apart from these components, who can find a “composite” of a car? It cannot be found. The component parts after they are assembled and the component parts before they are put together are the exact same, no more, no less; however, when taken apart, a “composite” cannot be found in any of the parts. Thus, this so-called “composite” is a mistaken view, a source of confusion.

The first of the sevenfold reasoning is to establish “self” and the “five skandas,” or “self” and “body and mind,” are not one.

We often think “self” and “body and mind” are one, and that our body and mind are who we are; apart from our body and mind, there is no “self” that exists on its own.

At this point, we can take turns with the examination by first breaking down the body. A human body can be divided into at least five sections: a head, two arms and two legs. So which of these five parts is “self”? The head certainly cannot be “self!” Because if it is just the head and nothing else, who will admit this is “self”? It is no more than a skull, not a person. The arms and legs cannot be “self” either, because during amputation, we can lose a left arm, right arm, even both, also lose both legs, yet still survive and think we exist. In every physical organ of the human body, we can conduct the same investigation and not find a “self.” Thus, a “self” cannot be found in our body at all. We normally think the synthesis of the elements of the body – blood, flesh, bones, skin and so forth – is “self”; but after examination, we do not find a “composite,” let alone a “self.” (You can go back and examine if a “self” exists; there are no restrictions or requirements during the examination.)

On a hopeful note, perhaps a “self” can be found in our mind. The mind is basically non-material – it cannot be seen or touched. Can our eyes see it? Can our ears hear it? Only the mind can see itself. However, after analysis, we are able to understand the mind arises and ceases moment to moment. Like the movies which are projected at the speed of twenty-four frames per second (FPS), each frame is separate, not a collective entity; however, each frame is projected so quickly it is difficult

to discern the change from one frame to the next. So, the images on the screen are lifelike. Or like the computer screen which is refreshed at least fifty times a second, our eyes cannot perceive this change; because it is happening too quickly, it can bring about an optical illusion. Likewise, we can infer our mind arises and ceases from moment to moment precisely in this way.

Assume we seize this present moment, what about the moments that precede it? Do they still exist? They have already been destroyed and no longer exist in this universe, or in any time-space. If the “past” still exists in a certain time-space, it could return; however, it basically does not exist any longer. What about the moments that come after this present moment – the moments that have not yet happened? Are they now in a different time-space, like actors waiting in the backstage ready to come on? Not so. This kind of view was held by the Sarvastivada, an early Buddhist school of the Lesser Vehicle, but it is incorrect. All other schools above it, including Madhyamaka, do not acknowledge it.

In that case, the so-called “self” and the mind of “self” are just an instant in time. But we normally think the “self” (or mind) is continuous – the “self” in the past, the “self” in the present and the “self” in the future; we do not think it is just an instant. This instant and our attachment to self are at variance; even if we exist only an instant, we do not admit an instant is the “self.” However, on further investigation, even this “instant” does not exist.

In the end, we are unable to hold on to anything; all objects outside and the mind inside disappear when they are broken down into their components, or examined from the standpoint of past, present and future. When our body and mind disappear, wouldn't the “self,” which is one with the body and mind, also

disappear along with them?

There is another method of examination. Our body can be divided into five parts; if all five parts are “self,” we would have more than one “self.” Since we normally think there is only one “self,” the five parts cannot all be “self.” If we choose only one among them to be “self,” what about the four limbs and the head which are all part of our body? Why is it only one of them is “self” and not the others? We cannot find an answer that is reasonable. Is it because we are too stupid? On the contrary, we are beginning to wake up! We cannot produce something that doesn’t exist! Not knowing that which exists is ignorance; knowing the true nature of that which does not exist is wisdom. To think something exists when it doesn’t is true ignorance. There are many methods of investigations in Madhyamaka that will not be covered at this time. In sum, the above is the first of the sevenfold reasoning: establishing “self” and the “five skandas” are not one entity.

The second reasoning is to establish “self” and the “five skandas” are not individual entities that exist on their own. The “self” cannot be like this table; it cannot exist outside of our body and mind. If “self” is not in our body and mind, we are even less likely to believe it exists anywhere else.

The third reasoning is to establish “self” does not rely on the “five skandas.” Does the “self” lean on the “five skandas” in the way a person rests against a car seat? In the sutras, this is described as “a lion resting in the forest.” Does the “self” rest in the “five skandas”? It does not because apart from the body and mind, a self cannot be found at all. Moreover, the so-called five skandas or the so-called body and mind can be deconstructed; after they are broken down, we do not find “self” in any of the

parts. Therefore, “self” does not rely on the “five skandas.”

The fourth reasoning is to establish the “five skandas” do not rely on “self.” The sutras have this analogy – “the vegetation that grows in the mountain depends on the mountain for its existence.” In that case, do the “five skandas” depend on “self” to survive? They do not. Based on the same reasoning above, we do not find “self” nor do we know where “self” is! Therefore, the “five skandas” do not rely on “self.”

The fifth reasoning is to establish the “five skandas” and “self” do not possess one another. Does the “self” possess the “five skandas” or the other way around? It does not. If the “self” can be shown to exist, we can consider this possibility; however, since we cannot even find “self,” how can they possess one another?

Therefore, “self” and the “five skandas” are neither one entity nor individual entities that exist on their own; they are neither reliant on one another nor in possession of one another. Finally, Chandrakirti added two other kinds of reasoning: the sixth and the seventh reasoning.

The sixth reasoning is to establish the collective form of the human body is not “self.” For example, although a car is no longer called a car after it is taken apart, if each component occupies a special place, that is, the wheels are at the bottom, the frame is on the outside and all the parts are inside, a new form is produced. Likewise, although each part of the human body is not “self,” if the head is on top, the two arms are at the side, the chest and stomach are in the middle and the two legs are at the bottom, the entire shape of a body is produced. Some people think this form should be “self.” The rebuttal is as follows:

What is a “collective form”? The head has the form of a head, the arms have the form of arms – are you saying these forms are “self”? Or is it the new form produced by the synthesis of all the organs of the body that is “self”? We will refute the form of a head is “self,” yet believe a collective form that consists of all the organs is “self.” In that case, what is a so-called “collective form”? Apart from the form of a head, arm and leg, is there also a collective form that exists? Or is it the form of the head plus the form of the arm plus the form of the leg and so forth that is called a “collective form”? After investigating in this way, apart from the form of every organ, there is no other collective form. As an example, the wheel of a car is round; it is round before it is assembled and also after it is assembled. All of the component parts of the car have the same shape before and after they are assembled; nothing new is produced. Therefore, neither the car nor “self” can be found in this collective form.

The seventh reasoning is to establish their composite is not “self.” In his rebuttal, Chandrakirti said: if the composite is “self,” then if we dismantle all the component parts of a car and place them in a pile, is it a “car”? Certainly not. It is just a large pile of parts and a large pile of steel, not a “car”! Likewise, after our body and mind are broken down, what’s left is a pile of flesh or bones, not a person.

The stages of practice

As a monastic, I have over the years dedicated much time to listening, contemplating and debating this topic. Having tried many different methods, I still do not find a “self”; moreover, it is clear to me it does not exist in the five skandas. However, this is only a realization attained through contemplation, not

through practice. Now you can all look for this self.

At the beginning of the investigation, we may have hope of finding a self, but the more we look the more we lose hope of finding it. What can we do then?

As explained in previous teachings, when we calm our mind and settle into meditation on “no-self in person,” we do not follow the Ch’an teachings to abandon all attachment; we are not at that level yet. Instead, we want to eventually attain a state that is “indescribable” and “inconceivable”– through speech and contemplation, respectively. If we begin by embracing “non-attachment,” there is no point in even starting a practice.

Nowadays, some monastics and lay people think releasing captured animals and other good deeds are all an attachment to be avoided. At the ultimate level, they are correct, but ordinary people live in an environment wherein everything is an attachment. Learning the Dharma, taking refuge, generating bodhicitta, reciting mantras, practicing the six paramitas, cultivating the four all-embracing virtues, upholding the precepts are all an attachment. In that case, are we to let go of all these practices? In general, people who are not familiar with the Dharma are even more attached to things. There is no way an ordinary person can stay free of attachment. Therefore, these views are incorrect. Dharma practice is fastidious about undertaking the practices in stages; these stages must be in the right order.

Beginners need to first develop attachment, in particular attachment to renunciation and bodhicitta, since these kinds of attachment will take us on the path to liberation and overturn

our self-attachment. Like cleaning our face with soap, we first use the soap to wash the dirt off our face, then clean the soap at the end. Similarly, we first develop an attachment, then use this attachment to overturn self-attachment! It would be a big mistake to begin our practice with no attachment at all. Therefore, when we enter into meditation on “no-self in person,” we do not like in Ch’an discard all thoughts, instead we examine and contemplate. (This is not to criticize the teachings in Ch’an; the inconceivable state in Ch’an is a goal we want to attain, but it is beyond what we can hope to reach at this time.)

How do we contemplate? After our mind is still, we look for “self” using the sevenfold reasoning. With repeated investigation and contemplation, we eventually attain a profound experience of “no-self.” Like when we are looking for a thing in the house in the dark and cannot find it, no one can say this thing is not in the house; if we still do not find it when the house is lit up, we can say with certainty this thing is not in the house. Let us rely on the light of wisdom to look for “self”; when we engage in contemplation repeatedly, in the end we discover this “self” not only cannot be found, it basically does not exist.

Once we have a strong sense this “self” does not exist, interrupt the contemplation and rest the mind in this conviction or feeling for a minute, three minutes or five minutes—the longer the better. Initially, it does not last very long, only a few seconds or so. When this experience disappears, continue the contemplation as before to regain that feeling of “no-self.” It is likened to reading a book under the light; we see everything that is there or not there in the book very clearly. This strong feeling of “no-self” is called realization of no-self; it is realization at an early stage.

Sometimes we may want to take a break from our contemplation; in that case, do not think of anything good or bad, just allow the mind to settle down; this is called resting. Then resume the investigation until we gain that feeling of “no-self” again and abide once more in this state of emptiness. This is called practicing no-self.

Do you think this is all too easy? Is there a better way to practice emptiness? Yes, there are practices in tantra such as Dzogchen. However, this is not the time for Dzogchen. We still need to first cultivate renunciation and bodhicitta, then practice “no-self in person”; after reaching a certain level in this practice, we can move on to the more advanced methods. This way, we can gradually bring ourselves closer to tantra. The discussion above on the practice of no-self in person pertains entirely to Madhyamaka methods in sutra, not in tantra. May you all be diligent in your practice!

Part II: The specific practice of no-self in phenomena

Self in phenomena

To fully realize “no-self in phenomena,” we need to first understand what “self in phenomena” is. What is “phenomena”? Originally, “phenomena” referred to all the knowables in samsara and nirvana. However, with the separation of “self” into “self in person” and “self in phenomena,” the prevailing definition is less inclusive; apart from “I, me” and “attachment to mine,” all conditioned and unconditioned entities are called “phenomena.” What is “self”? The “self” in “self in person” is essentially “I, me”; the “self” in “self in phenomena” is different, it denotes true existence.

There are many complex methods in Madhyamaka that negate the inherent existence of phenomena. Here we shall only discuss the method that is most specific.

The method of realizing no-self in phenomena

In the following, phenomena are examined from three specific standpoints: first, things are examined from the standpoint of their “cause” and found to be non-arising; second, things are examined from the standpoint of their basic nature and found to be non-abiding; third, things are examined from the standpoint of their “result” and found to be non-ceasing. These three aspects of phenomena – “non-arising, non-abiding and non-ceasing” – are critical.

In the Buddha’s *Prajnaparamita Sutras* and Nagarjuna’s *Collection of Madhyamaka Reasoning*, we are told phenomena are “non-arising, non-abiding and non-ceasing.” However, we believe all things, including human beings and the world outside, undergo stages of existence – formation in the beginning, continuation in the middle and destruction in the end, that is, they “arise, abide and cease”; hence we think all things are real and truly exist.

People generally hold this simplistic view. We rely on our eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body, and conclude all things that our eyes can see, our ears can hear, our nose can smell, etc. exist. For example, when we see a cicada evolve from birth to transformation and finally to death, we say, “the cicada arises, abides and ceases.” Or for example, when an instrument is played, a sound is produced which our ears can hear; when this sound continues, for a minute or an hour, we believe it still exists – this is the continuation stage; when the sound comes to an end,

we think it is gone. Does this sound actually exist? We ordinary people believe it exists. We can hear the sound or see the acoustic wave through an instrument, that’s the proof; apart from that, there is no evidence. But all this originates in our ear and eye consciousness. Because we have faith in our ear and eye faculties and trust they are not deluded, we believe what our eyes and ears perceive is real, what they do not perceive is not real. This is how ordinary people think; it is our basic logic, also mankind’s simple logic. If our eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body are mistaken, how do we remedy it? It cannot be remedied. Because even with very sophisticated instruments, we still need our eyes to conduct the examination. We cannot perceive or recognize things without our eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body; all the evidence lies in our eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body. If they are mistaken, we have no recourse. This is precisely the conventional view.

What is the view in Prajnaparamita? The Buddhist view transcends the conventional way of thinking. The Buddha once said, “I do not dispute what people say, but people take issue with what I say.” What this statement means is: the Buddha did not refute what people saw; he understood from their standpoint they saw things and believed the things they saw are real; but the things they believe are real are not necessarily real, the things they believe are not real are also not necessarily so.

As mentioned above, we believe all conditioned phenomena arise and cease; the evidence lies in our own eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body. Even when we listen to the teachings of the Buddha or our teachers, we still depend on our ears. How else would we hear the Dharma? In short, we cannot discern whether a thing exists or not without relying on our physical faculties. Now we shall investigate this question with the Buddha’s way of reasoning.

The logic of no-self in phenomena

1. Phenomena are non-arising

First, things are examined from the standpoint of their cause and found to be non-arising. This method of investigation into phenomena from the standpoint of their “cause” is called “the reasoning of refuting the arising from self or other” (also known as the reasoning of vajra fragments).

We start by examining whether things arise from self. This view is logically untenable. Ordinarily, we do not believe phenomena arise from self either. The assertion in some non-Buddhist schools of thought that things “arise from self” is based on an analogy: from the time the sun sets to dawn the following day, we do not see the sun but that is not because it doesn’t exist, the sun exists; likewise, before a sprout arises, we do not see it but in fact it exists. Since most people do not accept this view, we shall not take the time to refute it. Our primary objective is to refute “arising from other.”

Many people are of the opinion things “arise from other.” For example, we believe a seed and a sprout are two different entities, so a sprout arises from something other than itself. Let us carefully examine this argument. As mentioned previously, Buddhism is not dogma; its views should not be accepted on blind faith and can be tested.

There is an obvious flaw in thinking all things arise from other. For instance, if a sprout arises from a seed, do they exist simultaneously or sequentially?

To assert they exist simultaneously is incorrect. If they

exist at the same time, it means the result exists at the time of the cause; the cause exists at the time of the result. If the result already exists at the time of the cause, what purpose does the cause serve? Of what use is it? Actually, this cause is useless; in other words, the sprout arises but not from the seed.

What is the concept of “simultaneous existence”? It is to say two entities are independent and not reliant on each other. If cause and result exist at the same time, they cannot possibly be a causal relationship. The “cause” does not bring about the “result,” so how can it be its cause? Since childhood, we have been taught to believe a result is produced when causes and conditions come together. Therefore, to assert cause and result exist simultaneously is incorrect.

Nevertheless, few people think cause and result exist at the same time. The vast majority believe: the sprout that arises next year from the seed does not exist in the seed this year; a new sprout, previously nonexistent, is produced only when all the necessary conditions like temperature and moisture are in place. In general, people have a very coarse perception of the macroscopic world, but they have no conceptual understanding of the microscopic world. When we investigate the way things exist in the microscopic world, we discover all matter arise and cease in an instant. In the second instant, the first instant has already ceased; in the first instant, the second instant has yet to arise. That is to say all matter exist in just an instant.

This is a point many scientists understand. It is the basis of indeterminacy in quantum physics. When a very small particle is examined, the speed and position of the particle cannot be determined at the same time. If its position can be determined, its

speed cannot be measured; if its speed can be measured, its position cannot be determined. By definition, speed is equal to distance divided by time, distance is equal to the end point minus the starting point, time is equal to the final moment minus the first moment; since a particle only exists in an instant, not in a time continuum, its speed naturally cannot be measured. This interpretation in quantum physics is close to certain views in Buddhism, but the Buddha expounded teachings at an even deeper level.

In this microscopic world, all matter exists in an instant. If we think the cause is already present in the first instant and the result is produced in the second instant, that means when all the requirements, like temperature, moisture, seed and soil, are in place in the first instant, the result does not yet exist; when the result is produced in the second instant, the cause has already disappeared and no longer exists; at no point do cause and result meet. Such being the case, how does the “result” arise from the “cause”? If at the time of the cause, the result also exists, it is possible for the cause to bring about an effect. However, if the result does not even exist, to what or whom can the cause affect a change? Actually, when the cause exists, the “result” is like empty space. What can the “cause” possibly do to empty space? Nothing! Likewise, inasmuch as cause and result exist sequentially, if at the time of the result, the cause does not exist, how can the cause take effect? This is likened to a dead person and a living person; when one is born and the other is already dead, what can the dead person do to the living person? Nothing! Because there is basically no way for them to meet. In the microscopic world, all matter is like this; two things that exist sequentially cannot possibly exist in the same time-space. Since they do not come in contact at all, how can they be cause and result? It is not possible.

Under these circumstances, how does the macroscopic world come into being? This is called dependent arising. That is to say, all things appear or come into existence when not being examined; however, upon investigation, there is no rationale or basis for their existence. A causal relationship cannot be found. The things we normally regard as very real begin to disappear in our hands.

Based on the analysis above, “arising from other” cannot be established. However, we can only make this deduction in the microscopic world. In the macroscopic world, cause and result do cross paths just as a father and son can communicate with one another. This is the viewpoint of ordinary people. The fact is there is no real causal relationship between the so-called “cause” and “result” in conventional reality.

Since “arising from self” is refuted, “arising from other” is also refuted, “arising from both” is naturally refuted. There is no other way things can arise. Thus, all matter is “non-arising.” The cause-result relationship is not established through logic but through our sense faculties. From the standpoint of our eye, ear, nose and tongue, cause and result, transmigration in the six realms, studying the Dharma and attaining buddhahood – these all exist; but from a very microscopic standpoint, when logic is applied, all of these things do not exist.

We are accustomed to thinking all matter can be produced. In that case, how are they produced? I have already explained the practice before and after meditation; in the actual practice, follow the method of reasoning above until you come to the profound realization that phenomena do not truly arise. At that time, let the mind rest one-pointedly in this state of “non-arising.” Initially, this may only last a few seconds or a

minute. Because without sufficient practice, this state of non-arising quickly disappears. When it disappears, resume your investigation into how things are produced. When you again realize all matter does not truly arise, focus and abide in this state as before. This is called the practice of “non-arising.” By way of this investigation, we can comprehend and experience what the Buddha meant by “non-arising.”

Ordinarily, we see conditioned phenomena appearing everywhere, so how is it “non-arising”? As mentioned, it is the conclusion derived from our sense faculties that conditioned phenomena are produced. “Non-arising” is a method of examination at a much deeper level; it is beyond what most people can comprehend.

Students of chemistry should find all this easier to understand. When several chemical elements are mixed together, a new fragrance or color is produced. Some of the fragrance and color does not exist in the original substance; nevertheless, when these elements are combined, a new substance is produced – where this substance comes from cannot be explained either. Actually, this is dependent arising. There is no phenomenon that does not arise through interdependence; when two or more factors come in contact, something different is produced. For example, how does an object become red when it is not red itself? How does an ingredient become odious when it has no odor of its own? Where do they come from? No answer can be found. Some say, “That is exactly how things are produced! What evidence or proof do we need?” Nonetheless, these are all an illusion of our sense faculties; in Buddhism, it is called “dependent arising.” Although phenomena do not exist in and of themselves, or inherently, we are able to perceive them

through our eyes, ears, nose and tongue. The Buddha said of this, “like an illusion, like a dream.”

What is a dream? Although all appearances in a dream are very real to a person in the midst of the dream, they do not actually exist, so a dream is an illusion. Likewise, all things that our eyes, ears, nose and tongue come in contact with do not exist when examined. It is therefore said all phenomena in the macroscopic world are like an illusion, like a dream. This is not just a viewpoint but also a practice; by way of this practice, we can attain realization and subsequently take control of our surroundings. We have cited many such examples already.

To sum up, things do not arise when examined from the standpoint of their cause.

2. Phenomena are non-abiding

Second, things are examined from the standpoint of their basic nature and found to be non-abiding. In *Madhyamaka*, the method of reasoning that establishes “non-abiding” is called “neither one nor many.” By non-abiding, we mean the object that our eyes can see does not exist. Ordinary people will think this statement is absurd: I can clearly see that it exists, so why does it not exist? To answer this, we need to distinguish between the two truths – ultimate truth and relative truth. This is an essential point. In relative reality, the object that our eyes can see exists; our eyes, ears, nose and tongue perceive phenomena to be real. To say an object “does not exist” is not to say we do not see it, we do. For example, the things in a dream do not exist, but this is not to say we do not have dreams, we do. Likewise, it is not that we do not see the object; our eyes can see it is real, but it actually does not exist.

As an example, when a piece of fabric is taken apart and reduced successively to threads, to wool, then to dust particles and so forth, what is the smallest dust particle? By so-called smallest dust particle, we mean a particle in the microscopic world that cannot be further divided. But who is to say it cannot be further divided? If we want to establish the identity of a particle, do not continue to break it down; if we want to investigate the true nature of the particle, it is necessary to keep dividing it. Even the smallest particle cannot be established if it is divided on and on. Eventually, this piece of fabric disappears. The physical world outside, including the human body and all matter, can be broken down in the same way; in the end, all disappear. This is the Buddhist theory. Quantum physics is not yet at this level.

3. Phenomena are non-ceasing

Third, things are examined from the standpoint of their result and found to be non-ceasing. This method of reasoning is called “refutation of the arising of something already existent or nonexistent.” What is “the arising of something already existent or nonexistent?” For instance, when a sprout is produced from a seed, does the sprout already “exist” at the time of production? Or does the sprout “not exist” before its production? Our objective is to examine if the sprout is the production of an existent entity or a nonexistent entity – that is, whether the basic nature of the result before its production is existent or nonexistent. This is not a question of whether the result exists after it arises, but whether it is existent before it arises.

If the result is “existent” before it arises, it is the same as arising from self; most people do not hold this view, it is also not possible. In general, people believe the result does not exist before its production and that it comes into existence only after causes

and conditions come together. That is to say, there is no result at the time of the cause; the result is a “nonexistent” entity. In that case, how does the cause bring about the result? For instance, if there is a tree, we can use an axe or saw to cut it down; if there is no tree, what would the axe or saw be cutting down? Because the tree does not exist, these tools have no function. Upon careful analysis, we discover the cause cannot in any way bring about the result, nor can the result come in contact with the cause. The result only appears when causes and conditions come together; that is how dependent arising works.

Many people think when farmers grow crops, there is only cause, no result. It is precisely because there are no crops that they cultivate the land; if the crops are already grown, there would be no need to cultivate the land. When all kinds of causes and conditions come together after the land is tilled, a “nonexistent result” is produced. However, like empty space, the “nonexistent result” is something that basically does not exist. So how does the cause bring it into existence? How does a nonexistent thing become existent? When investigating the microscopic world, one can only say this is just naturally so; there is no cause that can bring a “nonexistent result” into being. Therefore, the result is non-arising; if it does not arise, it cannot possibly exist; if it does not exist, it cannot possibly cease. It is the same with a person: without birth, there is no life; without life, there is no death.

The stages in the practice of no-self in phenomena

At the time of practice, we need to close our eyes and earnestly reflect, next fully realize all phenomena are “non-arising, non-abiding and non-ceasing” and that all things our eyes, ears and nose previously perceived to be real are empty, then rest the mind one-pointedly in this state of emptiness. As mentioned previously,

this is the practice of emptiness; it is essential to beginners.

When we engage in calm-abiding meditation, we can sustain a state of non-conceptuality possibly for some time, but without analytical meditation, our practice is not very useful. Even if the mind can remain undistracted, it is meaningless if we lack the right view and understanding. When we enter into deep sleep or lose consciousness, we are also free from thought but what use is that? In the form and formless realms, celestial beings are able to abide without discursive thought, not for a day or two, but over incalculable kalpas; nonetheless, they have still not attained liberation. Therefore, there is no purpose in just pursuing mental stillness or equanimity, we must also have the right view and understanding.

For practitioners in the early stages of practice, the right view and understanding is attained through contemplation. Those who engage in the practice of winds, channels and drops in tantra or Dzogchen may be able to bypass these complex analytical methods and easily attain realization. However, this is possible only when all the requirements are met – the completion of the preliminaries, accumulation of merit and the presence of all essential conditions. If these conditions are not in place, it cannot be easy. Hence, analytical meditation is critical.

In the actual practice of analytical meditation, we initiate the contemplation when the feeling of emptiness is not present; when a sense of emptiness arises, interrupt the contemplation and allow the mind to rest in this state of emptiness; when the feeling of emptiness disappears, return to the contemplation again. After we attain a relatively good understanding and sense of emptiness through the methods in Madhyamaka, we then take

up the pith instructions of Dzogchen to realize emptiness. This is because the methods in Madhyamaka are the groundwork or foundation for Dzogchen. Most people cannot realize emptiness without undergoing this process due to their strong attachment to self and things. The exception is, of course, individuals endowed with very mature capacity. We can also attain realization just by following the methods in Madhyamaka, but compared to Dzogchen, the process is very slow.

This is the Madhyamaka practice of “no-self in phenomena.” There are many methods of reasoning in Madhyamaka that negate the inherent existence of phenomena. Here we have established phenomena to be non-arising, non-abiding and non-ceasing from the standpoint of their cause, result and basic nature only. Phenomena do not on their own arise or cease – that is the reality; their manifestations and appearances arise and cease – that is the illusion. It would be a big mistake to think we need not distinguish between good and evil because everything is empty; likewise, it would be a big mistake to cling to things as real because cause and result exist. In Madhyamaka, relative truth and ultimate truth must be in accord.

As previously mentioned, some lay people, upon hearing the Ch’an teachings on no attachment, will say releasing captured animals, reciting mantras, prostrating to the buddhas, doing good and rejecting evil are activities we should not develop an attachment to (meaning they need not be taken up). “Non-attachment” is the final accomplishment on the path. How can we not have attachment now? In the past, the Ch’an monk Moheyan arrived at the Samye temple in Tibet to give teachings specifically on severing attachment to all things. Some Tibetans took these teachings to heart; as a result, the tradition of making offerings to the buddhas

at the temple was suddenly terminated; the objects of offering were removed from the shrine. In protest, many among the learned invited the Indian Madhyamaka master Kamalashila to a debate with Moheyan. Why was this necessary? Because he overlooked the importance of practicing the Dharma in stages; simply instructing practitioners to forego attachment would mislead many beginners.

We can let go of attachment if we attain realization, but we need to go through a process; in the absence of realization, we have to persist in the practices. As Mipham Rinpoche pointed out in *Beacon of Certainty*: if problems can be solved just by way of “non-attachment,” all those people who have no attachment to their practice, why are they not liberated? Therefore, we must not fall into the two extremes of “existence” and “nonexistence.” Falling into “nonexistence” means upon hearing concepts like “non-attachment” and “inconceivable and inexpressible” in Ch’an, and words that relate to emptiness in Madhyamaka, we conclude that spiritual practice and worldly generosity are unnecessary, that doing good and rejecting evil, upholding precepts and so forth are unnecessary. Falling into “existence” means upon hearing that the Buddha, the Three Jewels, the Four Noble Truths, samsara, and cause and result all exist, we conclude that everything is real, not empty. At first, we do not want to fall into either extreme, but stay in the middle; in the end, it is all the same – there is no clinging to a middle or side. When we reach that level in our practice, our mind is free and spontaneous; before reaching that level, we want to avoid these extreme paths.

After realizing emptiness, let the mind abide in emptiness during meditative concentration; at this point, all things are non-arising and non-ceasing, but because we have not attained buddhahood, the mind will not remain in absorption. In post-

meditation, the external world exists as before; we must still accumulate merit, purify our karma and be mindful of the infallible cause and result. Through practice this way, there is hope for actualizing buddhahood.

Efficacy of practicing no-self in phenomena

Emptiness allows us to sever not only “attachment to self” but also afflictive hindrances like desire, anger and all cognitive hindrances. Generally speaking, we contemplate the impurity of the body to curb desire, and practice loving-kindness to dispel anger. However, upon realizing emptiness, these practices are no longer necessary; emptiness is the remedy for all afflictions. In Madhyamaka, the practice alternates between contemplation and calm-abiding: when we arrive at a strong sense of emptiness during contemplation, allow the mind to settle, do not continue to contemplate; focus one-pointedly on this feeling until it disappears, then start a new round of contemplation and calm-abiding; and keep repeating the process; this is the best practice of emptiness at the early stage. Unless you can achieve instant realization of Dzogchen, emptiness is practiced this way one step at a time. Through this practice, we can at least plant the seed of liberation in our mind, and substantially dispel desire, anger, ignorance and attachment.

Our discussion on emptiness is not very extensive; nonetheless, the methods of reasoning we have covered are sufficient for realizing no-self in person and in phenomena. You should all take at least an hour or two each day to practice.

In Chinese-speaking areas, many lay people like to recite the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Heart Sutra*, the *Medicine Buddha Sutra* and the *Earth Treasury (Ksitigarbha) Sutra*. This is all very good. With

renunciation and bodhicitta to assist us, reciting the sutras, burning incense and prostrating to the buddhas are all excellent. You need not interrupt these practices; they can be scheduled on your own time. But most importantly, you must cultivate renunciation and bodhicitta and realize emptiness if you want to attain liberation.

Conclusion

I have explained all these practices in everyday language, not in Buddhist terminology, so that they may be easily understood. Please be assured, however, the contents of the teachings come directly from the sutras and treatises; they are not my own.

Taking into account all our discussions, we already have a relatively complete path to liberation. If we truly practice in this way, we should be able to reach a fairly high level of attainment. In the absence of practice, even if we study the Tripitaka in its entirety, it will not be very helpful. Practice is so critical!

Apart from the topic of emptiness, we can exchange views on the principle and practice of renunciation and bodhicitta with our classmates, associates at work and lay people; with non-Buddhists, we can also speak to the benefits of taking refuge and the purpose of spiritual practice. This is a responsibility each of us should take up. Although it is not propagating the Dharma, any discussion or conversation that imperceptibly benefits other people is meaningful and necessary. Except for renunciation, bodhicitta and emptiness, nothing can solve the problem of birth, aging, illness and death. Presently, most people are at the stage of cultivating renunciation and bodhicitta; there is no rush to practice emptiness. We should first generate renunciation and bodhicitta, then realize emptiness to bring the path to completion.