

Practicing Dharma



by Bob Peck

Table of Contents

1. The Buddha	1
2. The Four Noble Truths	3
3. The Buddha Family	6
4. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas	9
5. Building the Foundation	12
6. Karma	13
7. Bodhicitta	17
8. Cyclic Existence	19
9. Anger and Ego	20
10. Meditation	23
11. Human Potential	25
12. Emptiness	27
13. Thought Transformation	29
14. The Three Principles of the Path	32
15. Vajrasattva Purification Practice	35
16. Lam Rim – The Gradual Path	40
17. Tantra – The Swift Path	42
18. Daily Practice	43
19. Daily Prayers	45
20. Bibliography and Recommended Reading	47

Dedicated with great respect, love, and devotion to my teacher, Venerable Robina Courtin, who flies like an eagle on the two wings of wisdom and compassion



Blessings to all beings!!

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1. The Buddha

Whether it's classified as a religion, philosophy, or a psychology, Buddhism is the study and practice of the teachings of Buddha. It's important to keep the words "study" and "practice" together. Many people read books about Buddhism. Some even make an intense study of it, but reading and study are not enough. Reading about Buddhism does not make you a Buddhist any more than reading science books makes you a scientist or reading gardening books makes you a gardener. Scientists and gardeners certainly read and refer to books and do a lot of study, but it is in order to make them more effective and successful at their work. It is important to read and study the teaching of Buddha to understand the concepts, but the work of a Buddhist is to put the teachings into practice in daily life.

The logical place to start in studying Buddhism is with the Buddha. What do we know about this person called "Buddha"? What was his life like and how did he come to be the founder of one of the world's major religions? What do his teachings have to say to us in modern times and how can they help us change ourselves?

Buddha was born in 563 BC in Lumbini, which lies in modern-day Nepal on the border with northern India. His name was Siddhartha Gautama. He was born into an aristocratic family of the Shakya clan, which is why he is also sometimes referred to as Shakyamuni, "the sage of the Shakyas". His mother, Mahamaya, died soon after he was born, and a local holy man named Asita made a prediction that the child would grow up to be a great teacher and religious leader. Siddhartha's father, Shuddhodana, was not happy to hear this. He thought of the holy men wandering in the forest with matted hair and sleeping in caves. He did not consider this suitable for his son.

Shuddhodana was determined to keep his son isolated and distracted to prevent the prediction from coming true. Siddhartha lived entirely within the walls of the family estate. He led a princely life, showered with material goods and sensual pleasures. Anything unpleasant was kept from him. He had fine clothes, good food, and was surrounded by music, art, beautiful women, doting relatives and teachers, and every imaginable pleasure. It sounds like the recipe for producing a spoiled monster, but Siddhartha grew to be a talented, kind, and intelligent young man. At the age of sixteen, he married his beautiful cousin, Yasodhara. He had a seemingly ideal existence inside the artificial world within the estate walls.

Shuddhodana's strategy seems to have worked for a long time, but Siddhartha was naturally curious about the unknown world outside. He secretly made arrangements with a servant and made several trips outside to see the world he knew nothing about. During these trips, he encountered an old man, a sick man, and a corpse. This was a traumatic shock to Siddhartha, who had been isolated from the unpleasant realities of life. He was shattered by the realization

that all people must suffer illness, old age, and death. It made his life of pleasure seem pointless if there was no escape from the inevitable suffering all must face. The young Siddhartha, whose world had always been so beautiful and pleasant, was now faced with a world that seemed an ugly prison of pain.

During his last secret visit to the outside world, as he was still trying to absorb this new reality of suffering and sorrow, he encountered a holy man. This holy man, a wandering ascetic, seemed so calm and at peace that Siddhartha wondered why he seemed unaffected by suffering. Was there some secret he had discovered to the problem of suffering? Having seen that it was possible to be peaceful and calm in a world of pain made Siddhartha determined to discover for himself the solution to the problem of suffering. At the age of 29, shortly after the birth of his son, Rahula, he left the family estate to join the wandering holy men of the forest to take teachings, practice their ways, and find a solution to the problem of suffering.

He studied under a number of teachers and learned much. He learned all that each one had to offer, but none of the teachings and philosophies completely satisfied him as a final solution to the problem of suffering. He also learned many different practices, and eventually wound up with a group that practiced extreme asceticism. He endured exposure to heat and cold, holding his breath for long periods of time, and extreme fasting in order to try and conquer suffering by suffering. Finally, near starvation, weak, wobbly, and foggy-headed from hunger, he realized that if he continued he would simply die without the answer he sought. He took a small bit of food and felt better, but this drew the anger of the other ascetics who considered him a quitter.

Feeling like a thorough failure, he sat down under a tree and determined to stay there until he had an answer to the problem of suffering or he died, whichever came first. He sat in meditation through the night. At dawn the next morning, he looked up and saw the morning star. He saw the world in a completely different way. He was "awake" to the true nature of reality and had solved the problem of suffering once and for all. He was Buddha, "the awakened one".

He stayed under the tree for a few days, continuing to meditate on and enjoy this newfound perception. He wished he could make it available to others, but it didn't seem possible. It was not a product of reasoning or rational thought. It didn't even seem possible to put it into words. Still, since all suffer, he felt he should at least attempt to give others a chance for this liberation from suffering.

He returned to the group of ascetics he had previously practiced with. They rejected him at first as no longer one of them. Still, there seemed to be something different about him, so they decided to let him speak. He taught them what is now known as The Four Noble Truths, and this was the beginning of a teaching career that lasted forty-five more years.

2. The Four Noble Truths

It's easy to see that there is a lot of suffering in the world. Pick up any newspaper, turn on the TV, go downtown, or look around your neighborhood. Or maybe look around your own house, or at yourself. There is no life that hasn't been touched by some kind of suffering and sorrow. Even given the best of circumstances, we all know (though we don't like to think about it) that we will grow old and die, as will everyone we know. From our own experience, we can understand that all living things want happiness and no living thing wants pain and suffering. The problem of avoiding pain and suffering and striving for happiness is a universal condition for all sentient beings. This is the problem that Buddha set out to solve, and he presented the solution in his first teaching.

The Four Noble Truths is a set of four statements or points that address the problem of suffering. Though they are apparently very short and simple, they are profound in their power to reshape our view of reality. They can be basically understood in a few minutes, but it can take a lifetime (or many lifetimes) to understand all the implications. The Four Noble Truths are the foundation of Buddhist thought and all subsequent teachings and practices flow from them. The Four Noble Truths are:

1. There is suffering
2. There is an identifiable cause of suffering
3. The cause of suffering can be eliminated
4. The method of eliminating the cause

They are often compacted even further into four points :

1. suffering
2. cause
3. cessation
4. method

The first Noble Truth is the existence of suffering. It may seem that there isn't much to say about the existence of suffering. We all know what pain is. We have all been sick at some time. We know that the world is full of hunger, poverty, and misery. There are many types of suffering, however, and not all of them are as obvious as what comes to mind when we think of suffering. Since we are saying that a thing called "suffering" exists, we need to define the term so we can be clear about its nature.

"Suffering" is the usual translation of the original Pali word *dukkha* (Sanskrit *dukha*). It denotes the usual things we think of as suffering - physical

pain, hunger, illness, etc., but it also has much wider connotations. It includes dissatisfaction, emotional disturbance, and “thirst” or unending craving and desire. Suffering is not something that only happens from time to time and doesn’t exist in between. Suffering doesn’t only exist when you hurt yourself or get sick. Suffering is a pervasive condition. If we are looking for a solution to suffering, we must look for a solution to all suffering, not just one or two particular kinds of suffering.

It’s easy to conjure up images of suffering, but it’s also apparent that it can mean a lot of different things. If we want to eliminate suffering, to get rid of things we don’t want, do we mean headaches as well as terminal illnesses? We need some kind of definition to clarify what we are going to get rid of. It doesn’t work to attack sufferings one by one as they come up. If we try to come up with a new method to eliminate suffering, we have to identify what we’re going after. Buddhism categorizes suffering into three types:

The suffering of suffering -

These are the obvious things we think of as suffering. They include physical pain and injury, disease, illness, hunger, heat, cold, etc. All creatures share the same experience of this kind of suffering. It hurts. We start life with the pain and discomfort of birth, end life with the deterioration into death, and in-between we are subject to all manner of illness and physical harm. This is the price we pay for having a physical body. We know that no matter how much pleasure our bodies give us, they ultimately betray us by breaking down, wearing out, and causing us pain.

The suffering of change -

Our bodies betray us and cause us suffering because, like all physical things, they are impermanent. All things are impermanent. This, like the knowledge of eventual death, is another fact that we are aware of logically but don’t like to think about. Not only our bodies betray us, but all the possessions we gather to make us happy will also wear out, break, or get stolen. Even if they don’t, we spend a lot of time worrying about all the terrible things that might happen. Conditions in our lives change, whether we like it or not. Our feelings change, and things we at first enjoy no longer satisfy us. When we try to find happiness through things, we find that our emotional satisfaction also changes. Things that make us happy at first soon become less and less satisfying. We wind up playing the “if only” game with ourselves; if only I had a new car, if only I had a different job, if only I had a divorce, if only I lived somewhere else. We move from object

to object looking for some lasting satisfaction and are continually disappointed. Like everything else, our bodies are impermanent, and no matter how much we enjoy ourselves, our lives become limited and painful as our bodies change. The fact of change itself causes us suffering. In a way, this is a much more pernicious type of suffering because it is subtle but much more pervasive. It is an underlying condition rather than a temporary discomfort.

All-Pervasive Suffering - (The suffering of conditioned existence)

This is the basis for the experience of the first two types of suffering. Our past has conditioned us with certain tendencies and habits that cause us to act in ways that create the conditions for our future suffering. From the Buddhist perspective, our past includes past lives stretching back unimaginable eons. The cycle goes on and we continue to create our own suffering. This is Samsara, the cycle of suffering that goes on from existence to existence. Our accumulated tendencies and habits that follow us from life to life and cause us to act in negative ways that continually create future suffering are our karma. Karma, to put it very simply, means that our present experience is the result of our past actions, and our actions in the present determine our future conditions and experiences. In essence, we create our own suffering. We do it over and over and over and never even realize it. In our minds, it seems that things just happen to us or that we just are a certain way with no apparent reason. If there is no reason for the way things are, then it really is pointless and hopeless. However, everything that exists has to have a cause and every cause has its own cause. Everything is impermanent because existence is a continuous flow of causes and conditions. The only logical explanation for what happens to us is that we have caused the conditions in the past for it to happen. As long as this process goes on without awareness or control, we will continue to create suffering for ourselves as well as creating suffering for others along the way.

Since we don't want to suffer, we should look to see if there is a cause for suffering. By looking at the types of suffering, we can see that the ultimate cause of suffering is the mind disturbed by attachment, anger, and jealousy. If we try to find happiness by controlling external conditions but everything keeps changing, we are bound to fail. However, if the cause of suffering is in the mind and we can exert some control over that, we have a chance of actually doing something about suffering. By working with your own mind, you change the way you perceive the world, and that, in a very real sense, changes your world.

3. The Buddha Family

A proper understanding of the role of deities is essential to understanding Tibetan Buddhism in a meaningful way. Unfortunately, Western students may have a difficult time defining to themselves who the deities are. Westerners sometimes avoid discussion of deities because it smacks of superstition and magic, or reinterpret the deities as merely symbols of psychological states. This devalues the richness of the teachings and damages the effectiveness of practice. If understood properly, there is no contradiction in accepting deities and maintaining a logical understanding of things, even for hard-headed Westerners.

There are six types of transmigrating beings that inhabit our realm of existence (Samsara). For convenience, we'll call this our world. Buddhism posits many inhabited worlds and many universes, but let's start at home. The six types of transmigrating beings are hell-beings, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, demi-gods, and gods. These beings are on a scale of suffering to bliss and ignorance to understanding, but all of these beings are subject to rebirth in various forms determined by karma, not choice, and constantly move up and down the scale. We are familiar with humans and animals and can see many levels of development in the creatures and people we coexist with. Just in the last hundred years, science has shown the existence of many types of creatures that were unknown before. It is only logical that we should accept the idea of beings on a scale of development extending below and above us, whether we are aware of them or not. Logic dictates that they will be there in both directions. The "gods" of the mundane world enjoy beautiful surroundings and great bliss, but they are still deluded and attached, still not purified, so their blissful existence must end and they too are still bound by the cycle of suffering.

There are two types of transcendent beings: bodhisattvas and buddhas, those who have purified enough to break free of the karmic cycle. These are the deities of Buddhism as opposed to the mundane gods. These beings are no longer subject to karma and may take form by choice. Since they are free from attachment to form and understand completely the emptiness of form, they may assume any form they choose. They may also have multiple forms at the same time. The peaceful and wrathful forms of deities are like the front and back of the hand:

1. one exists because of the other
2. both are part of the same thing
3. both exist at the same time, but not in the same place since their existence is relational

A peaceful form denotes a wrathful form to be different from, but both are part of the same consciousness. Both may exist at the same time but not in the same place at the same time.

The process of attaining enlightenment is like alchemy, turning lead into gold. It's the lotus rising out of the mud. It is freedom from attachment to

physical form, from ignorance, from all the other limitations we place on our potential that we don't realize because we think what we have is natural.

It seems magical, but magic is only that which we don't understand. My cat thinks I'm magical, and to her I am. She knows I can make heat and light, I can make food appear out of nowhere, and I can make pleasant sounds come through the air. Though she doesn't exactly treat me like a god, she knows I have some god-like abilities beyond her own that she would have to describe as magical. Turning on the lights, getting food out of the refrigerator, or turning on the stereo seem natural to me because I understand them at a different level. Since there are beings at levels of understanding below us, why wouldn't there be beings at levels of understanding above us who would seem magical due to our lack of understanding.

At some point in becoming familiar with the various buddhas and bodhisattvas of Tibetan Buddhism, you will encounter references to the Five Buddha Families. These are five buddhas that have associated characteristics and are viewed as reflexive appearances of certain qualities within us. We contain elements, seeds of the qualities of the Five Buddhas, so they are part of us and relate to different parts of ourselves. These elements are what will ripen into buddha-qualities in us.

Are they only abstract symbols of parts of our personalities? No. They are separate beings, but we can relate to them as developed examples of qualities in us. Because of the qualities we share at a fundamental level, we are able to relate to them. Some of the characteristics of the Five Buddhas are:

buddha	element	color	delusion	mudra	family
Vairochana	water	white	anger	teaching	Vajra
Ratnasambhava	earth	yellow	pride, greed	giving	Ratna
Amithabha	fire	red	attachment	meditation	Padma
Amogasiddha	wind	green	jealousy	protection	Karma
Akshobya	space	blue	stupidity	earth-touching	Buddha

Notice that the colors of prayer flags correspond to the colors of the Five Buddhas.

The attendant bodhisattvas of the Five Buddhas are:

Vairochana - none

Ratnasambhava - Samantabhadra, Akashagarbha

Amithaba - Avolokiteshvara, Manjushri

Amogasiddha - Vajrapani, Sarvanivaranavishkhambin

Akshobya - Maitreya, Kshitigarbha

Of the Attendant Bodhisattvas, Vajrapani seems to be different. He always seems to appear in a wrathful, frightening form. Enlightenment brings together compassion, wisdom, and power (skillful means). Power is the ability to act in the most effective way based on compassion and wisdom. Vajrapani is surrounded by flames of wisdom and snakes of anger held in check by strong compassion. He is always standing, ready to act. He is energy personified.

Vajrapani has reason to appear frightening because he is a protector. He was a disciple of Shakyamuni Buddha who used skillful means to protect the teachings and the Buddha, so Buddha entrusted him with protecting the powerful energy of tantra. He is sometimes referred to as "Lord of the Secret", and he is also still considered the protector of the Buddha. Vajrapani has a peaceful form, but it is seldom seen. He is very much a bodhisattva-warrior.

The Dalai Lama says that wrathful deities "do not stir from the Truth Body or from love". We have to remember that if we are frightened or disturbed by wrathful deities, the fear and disturbance occurs in us. These beings appear to us the way they do because of our qualities.

Any practice involving a wrathful deity is a tantric practice and requires the permission and guidance of a teacher.

4. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

When we use the term “Buddha”, we are usually referring to the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, whose life we looked at in the first chapter. He was a human being like you and me, but he was able to use his mind to become “awake” to the true nature of reality. He then taught others so that they could also become “awake” and liberate themselves from their own delusions and suffering. Buddha was not divine or unique. What made him “Buddha” was that he developed the full potential of his mind. We practice Buddhism in order to become a buddha, to develop ourselves in the same way. There are many, many buddhas, and we all have the possibility of becoming a buddha, an enlightened being.

It’s not entirely accurate, however, to speak of becoming a buddha in the sense of changing from what we are now. Becoming enlightened does not mean changing into something else. It means becoming what you already are. There are many levels of mind, but we are generally only aware of the surface, ego-controlled level of our minds. Generally we think that the noisy, chattering, rational, labeling, emotion-saturated mind is what mind is, and that’s all there is. There is more, though, and we all have occasional glimpses of a different level of mind when we have sudden insights, suddenly see things in a new way, or temporarily lose ourselves in concentration or contemplation. We all know that occasionally things come into our minds from somewhere other than our normal thinking process. This is not anything abnormal or superhuman. It is simply that at these times we are accessing deeper levels of our own minds that we are not normally aware of due to all the chatter and noise from our egos.

The true nature of our mind is a very subtle, pure consciousness, undeluded and undifferentiated. The other things that we think of as our mind; feelings, tendencies, personality, identity, etc., are the layers of delusion and projection we have built upon it. The true mind, or buddha-nature in Buddhist terms, is like pure water. Water can be polluted with other substances, and if you identify the pollution as part of the water, then you might think that water is brown, smelly stuff that tastes bad and makes you sick. If you are aware of the true nature of water, you can find ways to remove the pollution and regain the pure water that was always there. In the same way, we can purify our minds and regain our true nature.

Buddhism maintains that every sentient being, every living creature, has this pure consciousness or buddha-nature. That’s what mind is. That’s what existence is. The other levels of mind are not evil. They are necessary tools for interacting with the world. The reason the other layers of mind contain our delusions that produce suffering is that we do not understand the nature of the tools, do not use them properly, and therefore never get the results we want. Since every living being has buddha-nature as a foundation for mind, every

creature will eventually become a buddha, though perhaps not for a very, very long time.

A buddha, then, can be described as one who has achieved liberation from suffering by purifying the mind, regaining a pure level of consciousness, and having a complete realization of emptiness or seeing through the illusion of our normal perception. It would be proper to say that we are all potential buddhas or even that we already are buddhas but don't realize it. The work of being a buddhist is working with the mind to develop its full potential.

The term "bodhicitta" means "enlightened mind", but it is generally understood to mean "loving-kindness" or "compassion". Compassion is seen as naturally arising in the enlightened mind that sees the interdependence of all things. Generating bodhicitta is understood to be a pre-condition for full buddhahood. Bodhicitta is the altruistic aspiration, the aspiration to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all beings, self included. Compassion can be used as fuel to achieve enlightenment. Generating compassion to whatever degree we are able at the time helps to further our wisdom and propels us toward enlightenment. As Nagarjuna says in the "Precious Garland":

If you and the world wish to gain the highest enlightenment
Its roots are an altruistic aspiration to enlightenment
That is as firm as the king of mountains
Compassion reaching in all directions
And a wisdom consciousness not relying on duality

Those who aspire to enlightenment for the sake of self and others are bodhisattvas. The mark of a bodhisattva is the desire to attain enlightenment quickly not for personal liberation, but in order to rescue all sentient beings. Transcendent bodhisattvas have actualized the paramitas, the bodhisattva perfections, and attained buddhahood but delay entry into full nirvana in order to act as "unsolicited friends" to suffering beings. They appear in samsara in various forms to lead others on the path to liberation. These would include fully realized beings such as Avolokiteshvara, Manjushri, Vajrasattva, etc. However, anyone who generates bodhicitta is a bodhisattva of some degree, so there are also earthly bodhisattvas. These would be people distinguished from others by their compassion and altruism as well as striving for enlightenment.

There are many stages of progress along the bodhisattva path, but the basic practice is always a matter of perfecting the six paramitas, the six perfections. These are:

generosity
morality
patience
joyful effort
meditation
wisdom

The bodhisattva practices are powerful tools for spiritual development. In his “Supplement to the Middle Way”, Chandrakirti says “Buddhas are born from bodhisattvas” and also goes on to state:

The mind of compassion, non-dual awareness,
And the altruistic mind of enlightenment
Are the causes of bodhisattvas

Both Chandrakirti and Lama Tsongkhapa state that “the seed of all buddha qualities is great compassion.” We may not be able to generate the great compassion of a fully developed bodhisattva, but practicing compassion as much as we are able plants seeds that will ripen into enlightenment. We can judge our progress along the bodhisattva path by how well we are able to practice compassion toward strangers and enemies as well as our friends. While we work with our minds to develop compassion for all living things, we should integrate the practice of compassion into our daily lives, truly trying to be kind and helpful to those around us. While we work to benefit others, our own minds benefit as well. Focusing on the needs of others is a way of counteracting self-cherishing ego and results in a less deluded, more stable, and more peaceful state of mind.

5. Building the Foundation

The base from which we must begin practice is our present human form. Human existence is a great opportunity to do extensive practice. It is a long and difficult process for animals to overcome ignorance. We have enough understanding to control our conditions better but enough suffering to compel us to eliminate it. A human existence is thought to be the best for achieving enlightenment in a single lifetime. The combination of having human form and being exposed to the teachings allows us many avenues of practice. Monastic life is ideal for practice, but practice and even liberation are possible in a secular life. Whatever kind of life we have, we are bound to cyclic existence by our minds. We are generally distracted, unfocused, and unable to apply ourselves. To build a stable foundation for practice, we should look to the Three Higher Trainings for help. The Three Higher Trainings are:

Morality
Meditation
Wisdom

Morality is practicing with our actions in our daily lives. It is incorporating the principles we learn from analysis, teachings, and meditation into our daily lives as much as possible. Insight gained from solitary practices should urge us to begin transforming our lives.

There are many different types of meditation. Meditation is for working on the mind, not for blanking out or enjoying blissful sensations. Meditation is focused work. Some forms of meditation are training in single-point concentration, which enables us the focus needed to see through the illusions we create for ourselves. Many of the practices and visualizations are very specific types of meditation. The insights gained in meditation should lead to further practice in daily life.

Wisdom is developing the ability to effectively use the two together. Combining an understanding of emptiness, which is the specific definition of wisdom, with a life of morality and the insights of meditation begins us on the path to our full potential. Wisdom is the ability to see through our own illusions, perceive the emptiness of things, and to see the interdependence of things, which causes us to act with compassion.

The Three Higher Trainings are also an antidote for depression. Depression is the sense of hopelessness when craving is not satisfied. The roots of depression are anger and attachment. Working to change our lives gives us a degree of control and input, which takes away the hopelessness.

6. Karma

Karma is the law of cause and effect. It is the core of Buddhist philosophy. It is the basis for the concept of emptiness, existence as interrelated causes and conditions. Since it has gained popular usage, however, there is a lot of misunderstanding about what karma is. In Buddhism it is a technical term describing the relationship between an existing object and the conditions that produced it. It explains how things come to be and why they are the way they are. All things are the result of the conditions that caused them. It is the creative principle of Buddhism.

Applying this principle to our own lives, our actions in the present produce the conditions we will experience in the future. This also means that the conditions we are currently experiencing are the result of our actions in the past. This is not the same, however, as “we get what we deserve.” There is no sin or punishment. There is positive and negative in the sense of harmful or not harmful, but there is nothing inherently good or bad.

In Buddhism, there is no permanent self or soul that continues from lifetime to lifetime or even from one moment to the next. There is a continuum of consciousness and a continuum of physical existence that give the illusion of stability and permanence, much the same as a picture on a computer screen is recreated over and over while it appears unchanging and static when we look at it. We can think of a river as being millions of years old, yet it is constantly changing as a continuous stream of water from moment to moment. The illusion of a permanent thing known as a river is caused by the continuity; the way the thing called mind is caused by a continuous but always changing stream of thoughts. The seemingly solid thing we call our body is a constantly changing continuum at the cellular level. Our mindstream develops tendencies and habits over time the way a river follows a course it digs as it goes. These tendencies and habits direct our thoughts in certain ways and help determine how we experience our current conditions. The way we react to our current experience sets up conditions we will experience in the future. Without an understanding of this process, we tend to think we just “are” certain ways or that certain things “just happen” to us. The idea of constant change and impermanence can be very uncomfortable at first, but it is liberating in that understanding the process gives us the opportunity to change who we are. Though it may not be easy, we do have the power to recreate ourselves. It only makes sense that we should become involved in the process since we are being recreated all the time anyway. We are just exercising some choice over who we will become.

How do we begin this process of exercising choice, of changing who we are and what we want to be? We have to begin with a basic understanding of how we are the product of our past actions and a lot of honest self-examination. We have to be totally honest with ourselves about what we feel and think, about

what we have done, the values and assumptions we impose upon the world, and the assumptions we have about who we are. This requires honest objectivity. It is not an exercise in self-criticism. Making a list of your faults and past negative actions so that you prove to yourself what a horrible and hopeless person you are is not what this is about. We do that with ourselves all the time anyway and it is part of the problem. It reinforces our feeling of hopelessness and inability to change. We want to increase hope and produce change. Remember that you, like everyone else, has buddha-nature. You have the potential to remove your own pollution, become wiser and more compassionate, and eventually become a buddha yourself. It's a process, but you have to do the work. Nobody can transform you but you. Starting with the idea that we are a constantly changing complex of conditions that has certain tendencies and inertia instead of a permanent and unchanging self, our self-examination is a deconstruction process, an inventory of the components that make up "me". What are the parts that are useful and what are the parts that are harmful? Where does my anger come from? What situations or people trigger my anger? What are my assumptions and beliefs about these situations or people that make me feel my anger is justified? Is my anger justified? What are the causes of my jealousy, annoyance, frustration, sadness, and depression? What about the flip side, what are the good parts of me? Who am I nice to? What are the situations that make me want to help someone? Who do I care about? What can I do to foster and expand the positive parts of me?

Look at a garden. It didn't just happen. It took planning to make something beautiful out of something ordinary. It involved choices about what to plant and what to pull up and get rid of. It took constant work and attention. It took mindfulness of the environment and conditions, working with them instead of against them. You get the idea. Make your life a garden.

We can start right now to create better conditions for ourselves in the future by living a moral, ethical life and becoming more compassionate in our actions, but this is only one aspect of karma. This is the karma of our future. What about the things we carry with us from the past that can spring to life whenever the conditions are right? A match is not fire, but it has as its nature the potential of fire. It brings together two conditions necessary for fire, sulphur which produces a quick, intense flame and the matchstick which provides fuel to sustain the flame. A third condition, oxygen, is always available in the surrounding air. What we carry around with us and call a match is really fire minus one condition. Whenever we want, we can apply friction that produces enough heat to activate the sulphur and produce fire. Our experiences in the past have shaped our ideas, values, emotions, and perceptions into bundles of conditions that we carry around with us. The negative emotions we are working on, anger, jealousy, pride, despair, arise from karmic potentials we carry with us from our past experiences. To make our present experience better and avoid negativity, we must begin neutralizing the negative potentials in us before they

can become activated by conditions we may encounter at any time. In Buddhist terms, we must purify them.

Purification of past karma is accomplished through applying the Four Opponent Powers; regret, reliance, antidote, and promise. It is important to practice purification to deactivate karmic potentials we already have. It is pulling the weeds out of the garden before they can grow, bloom, and spread.

The first step, regret, is important for honestly assessing the harm we know we have caused others. We all have negative karma from the past that we know will cause us suffering at any time it activates in our current conditions. Karma, like death, has unpredictable timing. We don't know when an action from the past will create its results. Besides the recent things we can remember doing that were harmful to others in some way, there are things further back that we have forgotten and things from past lives that we don't even know about. We should generate a sincere regret for any harm we have caused others in the past, not only for the suffering we may have caused ourselves, but also out of compassion for others. If we understand what it feels like to suffer, then we understand the pain we have caused others to experience. The regret needs to be sincere and honest, but it should not be maudlin. We are acknowledging our past actions, not trying to prove how bad we are. We bring these things up to work on them and change them, not to punish ourselves with them.

When we have acknowledged our past actions, we must remind ourselves that we are relying on the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, Buddhist teachings, and our teachers to guide us in dealing with our own karma. Our negative emotions and actions are symptoms of an illness, and we must rely on others to help us make ourselves well again. When we have generated a sincere wish to do something about cleaning up our negativity, we should turn for help to Vajrasattva, the bodhisattva of purification.

This brings us to the antidote, the actual practice of purifying our negative karma. This usually involves a visualization of Vajrasattva cleansing your body, speech, and mind with blissful nectar emanating from his heart. In circumstances where the full visualization isn't possible, recitation of the Vajrasattva mantra is also helpful. The short form of the Vajrasattva mantra is "Om Vajrasattva Hum" and should be recited at least 27 times.

Once we have purified, we naturally need to make a strong determination to avoid negative actions in the future. A promise or vow helps to strengthen our determination, but we should be realistic with ourselves. If we can vow to never do something again, that's great, but we should make vows we know we are able to keep. The power of vows is very strong, so even a vow to refrain from something for 24 hours or even an hour is very powerful. Over time, even small vows have a tremendous transformative effect.

By practicing purification, we not only defuse our negative potentials, we also make it easier to live an ethical life, which is our practice for avoiding negative future karma. They really supplement each other, so purification should

be a component of daily practice. There are some short but complete purification practices that can be done in about 20 minutes a day. Longer practices are good when you have the time, but the idea is to be consistent in purifying past karma. A short but daily purification practice is more important than elaborate but infrequent practices.

Karma is a very simple concept that can be understood by anybody, but tracing the implications through all facets of our lives and experience becomes very complicated. With a basic understanding of karma, we should begin practicing ethics and purification right away. Greater understanding and clarity will arise as delusions disappear as a result of consistent practice.

7. Bodhicitta

Bodhicitta is usually translated as “compassion” or “loving-kindness.” The literal translation is “enlightened mind.” The implication is that the enlightened mind which sees the interconnectedness of all things naturally generates compassion. While it is possible to become liberated, to free your own mind from suffering, bodhicitta is considered to be a precondition for full buddhahood in the Mahayana tradition. The aspiration to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all beings, self included, is a necessary requisite for full enlightenment.

There is a story of an old master going on a trip accompanied by a young monk. The monk was carrying the master’s bags as they walked down the road. The master was an arhat, one who has achieved self-liberation, so he was a very respected person.

As they walked, the disciple looked at the farm fields they passed. He saw the farmers and the oxen straining to turn up the soil. He saw the worms and insects killed by the tilling and the birds swooping down to eat them.

“How hard it is to make a living,” thought the disciple, “I will use all my strength to become a buddha and rescue all these beings from their difficult lives.”

Suddenly, the master stopped in the road and took the bags from the monk and proceeded down the road with them. The monk was confused but was afraid to ask about it. As they walked on, the monk kept thinking about the farm fields. He thought, “So many suffering beings! How could I possibly save them all?”

The master stopped in the road and handed the bags back to the monk. When they stopped for lunch, the monk finally got up the courage to ask why they had switched carrying the bags. The master said “When you had thoughts of saving all beings, you were a bodhisattva in thought and I as an arhat had to follow you. When you had selfish thoughts of saving yourself, you were my junior again and you had to follow me.”

An important step in generating bodhicitta is developing equanimity. If we want to save all sentient beings from suffering, we must have equal compassion for all. Having compassion for those we like is not progress. We already have that, but we can examine why we have compassion for certain beings and aversion to others to better understand where our preferences come from and work on expanding our compassion.

An excellent practice for developing equanimity is the meditation on “friend-enemy-stranger.” In a sitting meditation, visualize a friend standing in front of you, a stranger standing beside you, and an enemy standing behind you. Seeing our friend makes us feel good, and we want to look at them. The stranger is an unknown. We don’t have any strong positive or negative feelings about

them because we don't know them. We don't want to see the enemy, so he is behind us. However, just knowing he's there can still produce feelings of anger and fear. The idea is to examine the positive feelings we experience looking at the friend and then see if we can have the same feelings about the others. If the positions are switched, can we look at the stranger and have the same positive feelings? Most difficult is placing the enemy in front of us and trying to generate the same positive feelings we had about our friend. This is obviously not something that will happen all at once. The practice should be revisited regularly to check on how bodhicitta is developing.

Also, it is very important and it is stressed often in teachings that self must be included in all-encompassing compassion. It is important to be kind to yourself as you learn to be kind to others. It is important to take care of yourself so that you can continue the work. In the end, the two should be intertwined seamlessly. Being compassionate to others is working on yourself and working on yourself is being compassionate to others.

Being kind to others helps to develop our minds and give meaning to our lives. In return, we create a better world for ourselves to live in and make it more likely that others will help us when we need it. Everyone benefits and the line between self and others disappears. This is what the Dalai Lama calls "wise selfishness."

8. Cyclic Existence

It's obvious that even if we do not accept the concept of rebirth, of lifetimes in the past and lifetimes after this one, living our lives by Buddhist principles and training our minds will improve our lives and make us better people. There is nothing wrong with improving ourselves, and if Buddhist philosophy helps us become better people, it is beneficial for us and for others. To focus on this life only is a mistake in the Buddhist view, however, for Buddhists look far beyond this life. Buddhists believe that we have had countless lives in the past. Our attachment and ignorance keep us cycling through physical existence without any control over the process. Even when work toward breaking the cycle and achieving our full potential has begun, most of us will have many lifetimes of gradual improvement yet to go. So where does this belief of many lifetimes come from? Is it just a form of wishful thinking to circumvent the finality of death?

Most religions posit a supreme being as the creator of everything. Generally, if we follow the basic rules of the creator, we go to a life that never ends in a pleasant place or a place of punishment for not following the rules. If that is true, our lives are meaningless. Whether we are an artistic expression or part of an elaborate game, our lives have no inherent meaning if we exist solely at the whim of another. Ultimately, we have to ask who created the creator. As a whole, it just doesn't hold together.

On the other hand, science would put forth our existence as the product of a random chain of events probably started in a "big bang", a brief and very finite flash in a huge chain of accidents. Again, there is no inherent meaning and nothing under our control. And what existed before the big bang?

If we look at our lives, they don't seem to exist out of whimsy or accident. There seems to be an order to things, but where does the energy for the process come from? The matter really hinges on what we are to make of the thing we call consciousness. What is it and, maybe more important, where is it?

The general religious view is that consciousness, or mind, is the working of the soul, a permanent and unchanging non-physical part of us that continues eternally after the body dies. Since Buddhists start with the observation that nothing is permanent and unchanging, the explanation of soul is unacceptable. Science would explain thought as entirely a function of brain chemistry and electrical activity. While science can clearly show a connection between brain chemistry as a process connected to and able to influence conscious thought, it cannot explain what thought is or prove that it is entirely contained within the physical brain. Chemistry alone cannot explain sentience. Neither can really explain where thought comes from.

Buddhists believe that what we experience as our conscious mind is the gross level of a non-physical consciousness that continues after death, but it is

not eternal or unchanging. "Stream of consciousness" is a very good phrase and a good model for the Buddhist view of mind. We can observe the thoughts flowing through our minds, arising and disappearing, and see that every thought is the result of the previous moment of thought. We can trace the continuum back to the moment of conception, but since nothing can spontaneously arise without a cause, there must have been a previous moment of consciousness before conception. That moment of consciousness must have been in another form. We can look at cases of young children with unusual talents, memories of places they've never been but can accurately describe, and who speak languages they had no opportunity to learn. Science has a difficult time explaining human thought and behavior solely in terms of chemistry, but a continuation of imprints and tendencies from another life would explain a lot of things. This "mindstream", however, is changing moment to moment. The actions of mind in this moment that produce the next moment of mind are our karma, the causes that produce results. We are constantly creating ourselves, which allows us the possibility to change our own future. It is difficult to fight habits and tendencies that have accumulated over countless lifetimes, but the possibility is there.

Buddhists believe in rebirth, but rebirth is a term that can be misleading. What is really meant by the term is cyclic existence. Consciousness is compelled to return to physical form over and over. There is a desperation for physical form due to the cravings and ignorance of the mind. Ignorance is not a judgmental term here. It simply means the mind doesn't understand the process it's involved in. It constantly acts on false assumptions and never gets the desired results. The process of moving from form to form is not under control. The types of existence are determined by karma at the time of death. Since we don't understand the development of our own karma, we react with anger and resentment. Our reactions to karma cause us to act in ways that assure future suffering. We are bound to endlessly move up and down through all the realms of suffering.

When we speak of samsara, the cycle of suffering, and nirvana, liberation from suffering, we are not talking about places. We are talking about how we experience things. Samsara and nirvana can exist in the same place. Two people in the same place can experience pleasure or pain depending on their individual reactions to the conditions. When we decide to work toward liberation from suffering, we are deciding to change the way we experience our world. Liberation does not change the universe or remove us from it but changes our perception of it.

Samsara is our present experience based on the self-grasping delusion of ego. Hell, samsara, and nirvana are mental phenomenon. How we interact with the world is based on what our framework of understanding it is. By changing the way we experience things we can change our experience from suffering to happiness. We are still in the world. We still get hungry, hot, cold, sick, etc., but we experience these things as simply unpleasant conditions instead of unjust afflictions. Liberation is really a release from the suffering we cause ourselves.

9. Anger and Ego

Of all the emotions, anger deserves special attention. From violent rage to cynical dissatisfaction, it plagues us in its various levels and manifestations and creates destructive forces in our lives. There are very few instances in which anger is useful or even justified, and it's a dangerous tool even then. We can pretty easily look at episodes of our own anger and see that the energy and actions of our anger only prolonged the bad effects of an unpleasant situation or created new problems. If we think about it, it's not until we are able to let go of the anger that we are able to deal with things and we feel better. Anger is not useful. It hurts us and doesn't help.

It's also obvious that our anger has to come from somewhere, and the source is in our minds. If we continue to experience anger, it is because we are continuing to generate angry energy. In this way, we are responsible for our own anger. We create it and feed it, therefore, we can also learn how to put the brakes on it, redirect it, or shut it down.

Anger is a reaction to the world not being the way we would like it. It is the active result of our dissatisfaction with reality. Our anger is very real and we feel it is perfectly justified, but anger does not change the world. It only worsens how we feel about the world. Whether or not our feelings are justified has nothing to do with whether they help us deal with a situation. Anger is also dangerous because it is such a physical emotion. It affects our whole body with adrenaline, energy to lash out, and clouded thinking. It's seductive because it is such a strong emotion and easy to give in to if we convince ourselves we have a right to be angry, but the effect on ourselves and others will be negative. That doesn't mean that we have to accept everything or that we cannot speak out, but we must be careful that our reactions are not coming from our ego.

Ego is the source of anger, for without a strong ego-identification that insists on MY feelings and the way I want MY world to be, anger is simply not possible. A view of interdependence and loosening the grasp on ego-identification naturally decreases our anger. No matter how well you theoretically understand the concept of the emptiness of self, it is easy to demonstrate what a strong and subtle force it is by simply imagining someone doing or saying something harmful to you and feeling what your reaction would be. We can console and reassure our friends when harm has been done to them, but how well do we apply the same messages to ourselves? Can we tell ourselves to forget about it, it doesn't mean anything? The hurt and anger we feel definitely comes from a very real sense that WE have been hurt and what was done to ME was wrong?

The first step in actively dealing with our own anger is to be watchful. As we go through our daily lives, we should watch for anger to arise. When it does, we should control our actions. Anger will continue to arise in us because letting

go of our highly cherished egos is a long process, but we should try to break the connection between angry thoughts and angry actions. Do not let the anger in your mind control your actions. Do not inflict your anger on others. Anger is something you need to work on in your mind, so keep it there. Don't let it spill out into a world that already has too much anger. Keep it in yourself out of compassion and respect for the feelings of others.

While holding your anger inside keeps you from harming others, it is still a strong, destructive force that will harm you if you don't do something about it. Try to use the opportunity of anger occurring to observe and test it. What exactly does it feel like? Where does it come from? What are the thoughts that arise from it and why are the feelings so strong? Use this kind of observation of your own anger to learn what the factors are that trigger your anger, what past experiences the thoughts arise from, and what the hidden messages behind the feelings are. Not only will you learn about yourself, but the process of analysis will help you to be more subjective and dissolve your anger more quickly.

Once you have some success at being watchful for anger to arise, to observe, analyze, and contain it, you should begin trying to transform it into something beneficial. Containing our anger helps keep us from doing harm to others, which in turn also helps to clean up our future karma, but anger will harm us if we don't do something about it. Anger is a very strong energy, and if that energy could be redirected into something positive...

There are three ways we can use to transform the energy of anger into positive energy. The first is to look on difficulties and problems as opportunities to learn and practice. We should try to be grateful for problems and difficult people. They present us with opportunities to learn and grow. They are our teachers. The second is to view problems as opportunities to purify past karma. By experiencing the results of our negative past karma in an unpleasant situation now and not reacting negatively to it, we burn off negative karma so that we don't have to experience it again. The third is to practice tong-len, or "taking and giving". This is a practice of taking on the suffering of others and purifying it. If you are sick, imagine that you don't want anyone to feel the way you do and imagine you are taking on the suffering of all sick people through your sickness so that they won't have to suffer. It gives your own suffering a purpose and helps you generate positive energy, which will help your own illness also. Another simple tong-len practice is to imagine the suffering of another as black, ugly smoke that surrounds them. Imagine breathing in that foul smoke of suffering, letting it go to your heart where it smashes your self-cherishing ego, and breathing it back as out as purified white vapor. This lets us do something for another person and helps us purify ourselves at the same time.

There are many practices and tools that let us do something about our negativity and the resultant suffering we experience. They all depend on the motivation to work on ourselves to become better people and the perseverance to continue practicing in our everyday lives.

10. Meditation

It may seem strange to wait so long to talk about meditation in a discussion about Buddhism. Meditation is often the first thing people think about when they think of Buddhism. Someone sitting quietly, legs folded, hands in lap, doing what? What is the thing we call meditation? What does it do? What is it for? How do I do it? Like karma, meditation has entered the common language of the west, but there are a lot of misconceptions about what it is.

The common image of meditation is sitting quietly, cross-legged, focusing on the breath, clearing out thoughts of the day, and perhaps chanting a mantra. These are valid types of meditation, but they are not the only kind. These are generally used as preliminary meditations to calm and focus the mind so that other types of more advanced meditation may be practiced. Meditation is not a way of “blinking-out” or escaping the world. Well, it can be but it shouldn't be. That's not the point. The purpose of meditation is to work with the mind, to analyze it and change it. There are literally hundreds of types of meditation practices that are structured to achieve certain effects and changes in perception. They are designed to help us analyze our own minds and allow us access to levels of mind beside our noisy, everyday mind. These practices require a great deal of focus and concentration, so there is an initial stage of clearing the mind and focusing concentration. It would be a shame to stop there, though, since the meditation practices can help us change our minds instead of just offering temporary relief from the world.

The two basic types of meditation are stabilizing meditation and analytical meditation. Concentration is an important skill to develop and necessary for advanced work. Remember that one of our basic problems is that we don't see things as they really are. This is largely due to the fragmented, scattered way our everyday mind works. The more we are able to concentrate on objects, the more we are able to see them as they are and not how we wish them to be. Also, trying to change the inertia of mind is difficult work. Practices that we do to work on our minds require concentration to be effective. The better concentration we have, the more advanced our practices will be. Concentration is essential for doing the work of analyzing and changing our minds.

Learning to focus the mind by breathing exercises and calming meditations allows us to increasingly work on single-point concentration, itself a transforming experience that spills over into our daily perceptions. Working on increasingly complex visualizations or prayers builds concentration while allowing us to do other practices at the same time. Just sharpening our normally fuzzy view of the world we live in will change our lives on many levels.

Analytical meditations require concentration so that we can stay on subject and explore various topics and practices. There are numberless forms of analytical meditation, including reflection on points of the teachings, logical analysis of the nature of reality, and visualizations that focus on changing our

views and perceptions. Analytical meditations may be combined with concentration practices, prayers and mantras, or practices such as deity visualization, making for a comprehensive combination of mental practice that effect the way we view our world and interact with others. It only makes sense to work on the mind in a deep way to find happiness, for we can logically prove to ourselves that happiness is a product of our own mind and does not exist anywhere outside it.

The Tibetan word for meditation is “gom,” which literally means “to become familiar with.” A “gompa” is a meditation hall or meditation place. Meditation is the practice of becoming familiar with our minds. Stabilizing meditation is for calming the mind, clearing the mind, and developing focus and concentration. Analytical meditation is for analyzing the qualities of an object of meditation. We can use concepts as objects of meditation, such as compassion or emptiness. We can meditate on the good qualities of a buddha or bodhisattva and make an aspiration to attain those qualities. The aspiration is the object of the meditation. There are both stabilizing and analytical methods for meditating on emptiness.

Whatever methods are employed, one of the purposes of meditation is to develop single-point concentration. Single-point concentration is also called calm-abiding because the mind is not overcome with distraction and excitement. Concentration practices are not unique to Buddhism. They are found in many religious traditions and considered essential for spiritual development. They help free the mind from the ordinary ego mode. In Buddhism, this concentration is developed in order to focus the mind more intently and intensely during analysis and practice.

Meditation is essential for changing the way our minds work, but it should also be something integral to it. We meditate to take the insights and experience we gain to take back to our lives, not as a way of escaping from ourselves. Eventually we should be able to incorporate meditation into our lives so that our lives become a meditation and we can carry the meditative state with us as we go through the day. That goal is a long way off for me, as it probably is for you, but it is still only practical and sensible to keep working on it.

11. Human Potential

As part of our practice, we should spend some time reflecting on what it means to be human. Human existence is a rarity. Think of all the millions of forms there are to be born into: the deeply suffering people of the world, animals, and insects. So much suffering and we go up and down the scale with no control. Of all the beings of this realm, humans have the most positive or negative potential. We also have the most potential for understanding the nature of things. We have the combination of enough leisure time, not spending all our time just trying to survive, and a mind well adapted to analysis. We have enough suffering to compel us to end it but also the means to see a way out. A human form is difficult to obtain, so we should use our time here to develop our potential as much as possible.

If we aspire to have a human form again, it should be in order to continue the work we begin in this life and continue to be helpful to others. With that in mind, we should seek out and rely on a qualified teacher for guidance in for help and guidance in obtaining another human form. Realizing the positive qualities of our own existence, we should make a request to a teacher to help us use our potential to the fullest. Obtaining a human rebirth depends on creating the causes for it, abstaining from negative actions and practicing positive ones. We need a teacher to give direction and focus to our efforts.

The basic purpose of any religion is to change our lives for the better. At the core of any kind of true spiritual practice is a recognition of the need for compassion in the human experience. We would not exist at all today if someone hadn't shown us the compassion and love to care for us when we were infants. Even the most cynical of us feels the occasional urge to be kind. We naturally understand the strong power of empathy and how it can affect our mind and actions. The purpose of religion should be to transform us into more loving, compassionate, tolerant people so that we can incorporate those qualities into our actions in daily life. Religious practice must change your life if it is really religious practice.

As the Dalai Lama has pointed out, we have reached a high degree of technical and scientific advancement, but we still face many problems. Most of these problems we create for ourselves. The source of many personal, national, and global problems is that we spend too much time stressing the differences in details of our religious, political, and philosophical ideologies rather than emphasizing the basic similarities and goals we share. This is something we can change in our own lives by developing what the Dalai Lama calls "the good heart."

I like the term "practice." It not only denotes the particular things we do in a religious context, but it can also mean we do those things as practice for interaction in our daily lives on an entirely different level. Through prayers,

visualizations, and meditation, we are practicing to become better people. With that in mind, we should always strive to act in accordance with our spiritual progress in all our daily interactions.

Developing a daily practice takes commitment. In the West, we suffer from a great deal of impatience, and we should not have unrealistic expectations about what we can do to change ourselves. We have spent a lot of time, much more time than we know, creating who we are now. It will take time to change. We will need practice, in both senses of the word.

We have already spent a lot of time jumping from one thing to another to find peace of mind and happiness. It is important not to make the same mistake with Buddhism. We cannot give up in a couple of months because we're not enlightened yet no matter how many hours we meditate or how many complicated prayers we memorize. To integrate the teachings into our lives and work with them in an experiential way, it is more beneficial to have a simple but consistent set of practices we do daily than occasional bouts of extensive practice. All the elements of a complete practice session can be incorporated into a short morning and evening session. In between, we try to stay mindful of our actions throughout the day and try to act in accordance with the things we aspire to in our prayers. Gradually, changes will come in the way we view the world and interact with others. Though the changes may seem small, over time they become more noticeable and powerful. Once we have begun the process of changing ourselves for the better, it is simply a matter of keeping the process going and not giving up.

A good way to fit practice into your day every day is to take refuge in the morning and do purification at night. This helps to remind us of what we are trying to do and sets our motivation as we begin the day. At night, we should reflect on our day, think about the causes of any negativity that came up during the day, and purify any anger, depression, and unwise actions before going to sleep. The next day, we start over. Above all, we should never forget that the point of practicing Buddhism is to become who we already have the potential to be. We can only achieve that by working at it every day and going through the process of becoming.

You have obtained a human body. Understanding the rarity of this, the factors that caused it, and the difficulty in obtaining another should strengthen our resolve to practice dharma and rely on a teacher for guidance.

12. Emptiness

Emptiness is a concept that is central to Buddhism but also causes a lot of confusion for people trying to understand exactly what it means. When the teachings say that “everything is empty,” “everything is empty of inherent existence,” or “everything is an illusion,” it sounds as if nothing really exists. Buddhism does not assert that nothing exists; it asserts that nothing exists the way we think it does. The difference between the two is crucial to understanding what emptiness is all about.

We look at the world and divide it into objects and subjects. We see millions of things that each seem to have their own independent existence, but things don't really exist independently. There can be no subjects without objects and no objects without subjects; they exist only in relation to each other and are therefore dependent on each other. The way our senses work in combination with the way our minds work gives the appearance of independent objects, but in truth everything exists only in dependence on the causes and conditions that create it in the present moment. This is called “dependent-arising.”

We are limited in our view of the world by the characteristics of our senses and the way the mind interprets the information it receives from them. We can easily prove to ourselves that our senses have limitations. If I am in the back yard on a summer day and look at a plant, I would immediately classify it as a pretty red flower. In my view of the world, that's what it is. If a bee was hovering nearby and looking at the same plant, it would see something entirely different. Bees don't see in the infrared light range, so the plant would not appear red. Bees can see much farther into the ultraviolet range, though, so the bee would see an entirely different pattern of blues and purples that I am not aware of. On the basis of what the bee sees, it would immediately classify the plant as “food-source” or “not food-source.” Since we now have two different beings seeing the same object but seeing radically different things and classifying the plant in entirely different ways, the question is which has the “correct” view of the plant? The answer has to be neither one. Both encounter the object and perceive it in different ways based on the way their senses interpret its characteristics and their minds label it. The interpretation of the plant is valid for both the bee and man and determines how they interact with it, but neither has a complete view or understanding of what the thing is.

Science tells us that there is no such thing as a solid object. Things that appear solid to us are actually collections of molecules in constant motion that are always being acted on by a variety of forces, but we can't see them that way. Further, according to dependent-arising, the objects we see would not exist if not for the causes and conditions that make them appear in the present. Since they would not exist if not for their causes and conditions, we have to include the causes and conditions in our definition of what the thing is, though we are not

aware of everything that happened to cause the thing to be. We also need to be aware of the organizing nature of our minds. When we look at something and call it “chair,” “cup,” or “flower,” we need to realize that these are purely mental concepts that don’t really exist. Our mind categorizes objects in order to make quick choices on how to interact with objects, but our labels do not really define the object even though we act as if they do. We stubbornly hang on to our labels and categories. The way in which we label things builds a certain view of the world which, in turn, determines our experience of the world we live in. In this way, the world is a product of our own mind and is “an illusion” and “empty.”

This doesn’t mean that our physical senses are evil. We live in a world where there are physical objects we interact with, and the senses are essential tools for helping us interact with our world, but we need to be aware that we don’t have a complete view of things and the world is experienced in different ways by different beings.

In the teachings, we also encounter the term “ego-grasping.” Like all other things, the self is also empty. No matter how solid and full of inherent characteristics we seem to be, we are also a constantly changing nexus of conditions. What gives us the illusion of an independent self, the “me” we identify with, is the continuity of memory. In the same way that a movie creates the illusion of objects and people from a series of ever-changing individual pictures flickering by, our independent self is an illusion created from the continuity of memory and thought. Memory is a product of mind, and even mind itself is constantly changing. It’s ironic that we think we can’t change when we are changing all the time anyway.

We can speak of rivers as being old. We can say that a certain river is 300,000 years old. We can look at it on maps and say that it is located at a certain place. It is also true, however, that a river is constantly changing and is never the same from moment to moment. In one sense we can say the river is the same as yesterday and it’s also true that it is never the same. What gives the appearance that a river is a definite thing is the continuity of the flow of change. We can speak of the river as an object as the conventional truth of a river but we must keep in mind the larger picture of a constantly changing stream of changing conditions as the ultimate truth of the river.

When we first begin to think about the implications of this, it can be very uncomfortable. We may feel like the rug has been pulled out from under us and we cannot trust or believe anything. Our comfortable, stable world has been profoundly shaken. If we find, though, that we can accept the idea that the world we see is a creation of our mind, it also has a liberating effect. It means that if we change our perceptions of the world, we change how we experience the world. If we are willing to acknowledge that we have created the world we live in, then we can also change our world. We are not hopeless.

13. Thought Transformation

If we can continue to interact with the world in a conventional way but accept a larger view that everything is interconnected and constantly changing, we can begin the process of thought transformation. The implication is that the world is malleable and we can have influence over the direction we take and the way we experience life.

Our perceptions shape our view of the world, in effect creating the world we live in. If two people can be in the same place and see it as “beautiful” and “ugly” respectively, beauty and ugliness have nothing to do with the place and everything to do with what is in the mind of the individual. If our world appears bleak and full of problems and anxieties, we can actively work to change the picture.

We already know that we live in a world of suffering. If we can accept suffering as something that happens instead of getting angry because it seems wrong and unfair, we will go a long way toward lessening our own suffering. It doesn't mean that we stop caring. Suffering is wrong and unfair, but we might as well not get angry about it because the anger does not solve the problem. We can find better ways to deal with suffering if we leave anger out of the picture entirely.

In fact, why not be truly radical and turn the whole thing around. Since we are always going to have problems anyway, why not try to use them to create happiness. If we can change our experience by changing our perceptions, can we change problems into a source of happiness?

If we are beginning the job of making a better life, we need opportunities for practice. The problems that come up in our lives are opportunities for practice. They challenge us, test us, and let us know how we are doing in changing our reactions. In that way, problems are beneficial to us and we need them in order to learn and grow. We should be thankful for our problems because they are the basis of our practice and we need them to continue.

Due to our understanding of karma, we know that the problems we experience in the present are the result of our actions in the past. Our current problems give us an opportunity to clear out past negative karma. By experiencing the unpleasant result and burning off the energy of the past karma or experiencing a situation and reacting differently, neutralizing the karma instead of perpetuating it, we can start getting rid of negativities that have followed us. Dealing with our problems becomes a way of purifying negative karma and ensuring a better future. Again, our problems give us opportunities to practice. They ultimately benefit us and we need them to continue the practice.

We can also use thought transformation to generate bodhicitta. We can use the experience of our suffering to generate compassion for the suffering of others and make the intention, generate the wish, to take on their suffering. An

effective practice for generating bodhicitta and practicing thought transformation at the same time is tong-len, or the practice of taking and giving. In this practice, we visualize taking the suffering of others out of our compassion for them. We can start with those who are close to us, family, friends, and people we already have compassion for, and then extend the practice to others as we generate greater compassion. A simple tong-len practice is to visualize the suffering of the person as black, evil smoke that surrounds them. Then visualize yourself breathing in the foul smoke, taking it into yourself where it is purified by your heart, and breathe it back at the person as white purified steam that contains love and blessings. This is also a practice you can do for yourself if you are the one who needs help.

Tong-len is a practice that can be done anywhere and anytime. Even though it is an entirely mental practice, it can create tremendous positive energy. It keeps our minds habituated to always generating compassion and gives us something to do when we don't know what to do otherwise. Once we have the bodhisattva intention, we become more sensitive to the suffering of others. It is obvious that we cannot do much to alleviate all the suffering in the world and there is a danger of sliding back into hopelessness. Tong-len allows us to always be able to do something about suffering, even if we can't cure illness or travel to where starvation is rampant, we can always mentally work on alleviating the suffering of others. The practice helps us to more spontaneously act in compassionate ways when we have the chance and have a way to keep from being overwhelmed by the suffering of the world. I am not qualified to comment on the effect of mental energy on the physical world, but I do personally believe that this type of visualization has some kind of positive effect on the person.

Thought transformation is the mental practice of always putting others before yourself and to make their happiness more important than your happiness. This doesn't mean giving up our personality or becoming a doormat, doing anything anyone wants us to. It means we consider the needs of others more important than self-satisfaction and act accordingly. This helps lessen ego-grasping, the cause of our suffering in the first place. Others benefit from our positive actions. Everyone is much better off and there is a more positive environment for everyone.

The Eight Verses of Thought Transformation summarize the practice of method and wisdom. The first seven verses deal with the practice of compassion, loving-kindness, bodhicitta (words used interchangeably in Buddhist materials, but should all be understood as referring to the same thing) - the practice of ending our own suffering by helping others with their suffering. By reciting these verses and trying to live according to them as much as possible, all of our experiences and all our actions can become practice. The Eight Verses of Thought Transformation are:

1. Determined to accomplish all success, I shall always practice holding dear all sentient beings, who are more precious than wish- fulfilling gems.
2. When in the company of others, I shall always consider myself the lowest of all, and from the depths of my heart, hold others dear and supreme.
3. Ever-mindful, the moment a delusion appears in my mind, endangering myself and others, I shall confront and avert it immediately.
4. Whenever I see beings who are wicked in nature, overwhelmed by violent negative actions and suffering, I shall hold them dear, as if I had found a precious treasure.
5. When others abuse me with insults or mistreat me, I shall accept defeat and offer the victory to others.
6. When someone I have benefited causes me harm, I shall regard that person as my holy guru
7. In short, both directly and indirectly, I shall offer every benefit and happiness to all beings, who are my mothers. I shall secretly take upon myself all their harmful actions and suffering.
8. Undeiled by the strains of the delusions of worldly concerns, may I perceive all phenomena as illusory and be released from the bondage of attachment.

Big stuff! Big promises! But this is where we start, by setting the intention to do these things and then working on them however we can at whatever level we're at, slowly improving and moving toward the eventual goal. The process of creating happiness out of suffering is very deliberate and you have to make yourself do it.

14. The Three Principles of the Path

In this chapter, we'll take a step-by-step look at "The Three Principles of the Path" by Lama Tsong Khapa. The intent was to render the many stages of the path into three main areas or aspects. The text condenses the main points of practice into a compact and easy to remember form. It utilizes and draws on scriptures from all areas of Buddhism. The main foundation of the text is the Perfection of Wisdom sutras (Prajnaparamita), which are concerned with understanding emptiness. The motivation for studying the text should not be for personal gain or personal enlightenment but to bring health and happiness of all beings.

The three aspects of the Buddhist path are:

renunciation – the determination to be free from cyclic existence

bodhicitta – the altruistic intention to become enlightened for the sake of others

emptiness – a correct understanding

It's traditional to begin a text of this type with homage to a high object. Here, the object is the high lamas because the three aspects of the path are realized under the guidance of a lama.

I bow down to the venerable lamas

After the homage is the promise to compose the text.

I will explain as well as I am able

The essence of all the teachings of the conqueror

The path praised by the conqueror's children

The entrance for the fortunate ones who desire liberation

The next stanza is symbolic of the three aspects of the path. The "path pleasing" refers to renunciation, "make good use of leisure and opportunity" refers to being of benefit to others, and "not attached to the joys of samsara" refers to understanding emptiness.

Listen with clear minds, you fortunate ones

Who direct your minds to the path pleasing to the Buddha

Who strive to make good use of leisure and opportunity

And are not attached to the joys of samsara

The next three stanzas emphasize the purpose of seeking freedom from cyclic existence and the strong determination it takes. Our present suffering arises out of contaminated mental and physical aggregates. Our physical aggregates are the basis for attachment and our mental aggregates generate afflictive emotions. We need to remove the influence of contamination and afflictive emotions. The six basic afflictions:

Desire
Anger
Pride
Doubt
Afflictive view
Obscuration

We must stop creating new negative karma and stop nurturing old negative karma.

Those with bodies are bound by the craving for existence
Without pure renunciation, there is no way to still
The attraction to the pleasures of samsara
Thus from the outset, seek renunciation

Leisure and opportunity are difficult to find
There is no time to waste, reverse attraction to this life
Reverse attraction to future lives, think repeatedly
Of the effects of karma and the misery of this world

Contemplating this, when you do not for an instant
Wish the pleasures of samsara
And day and night remain intent on liberation
You have then produced renunciation

The next three stanzas outline the altruistic intention.

Renunciation without pure bodhi-mind
Does not bring the perfect bliss
Of unsurpassed enlightenment
Therefore, bodhisattvas generate the bodhi-mind

Swept by the current of the four powerful rivers
Tied by strong bonds of karma, so hard to undo
Caught in the net of self-grasping
Completely enveloped by the darkness of ignorance

Born and born again in boundless samsara
Ceaselessly tormented by the three miseries
All beings, your mothers, are in this condition
Think of them and generate the bodhi-mind

The next stanza states that intention alone is not enough. We must train in wisdom as well.

Though you practice renunciation and bodhi-mind
Without wisdom, the realization of emptiness,
You cannot cut the root of samsara
Therefore, strive to understand dependent-arising

The next five stanzas concentrate on wisdom. The root of all our afflictions is ignorance, which is not understanding dependent-arising and thinking that things have inherent existence. Wisdom and ignorance perceive the same things but view them in different ways.

One who sees the infallible cause and effect
Of all phenomena in samsara and nirvana
And destroys all false perceptions
Has entered the path that pleases the Buddha

Appearances are dependent-arising
Voidness is free of assertions
As long as these two are seen as separate
One has not realized the intent of the Buddha

When these two realizations are simultaneous
From a mere sight of dependent-arising
Comes certain knowledge that destroys mental grasping

Appearances clear away the extreme of existence
Voidness clears the extreme of non-existence
When you understand cause and effect from the viewpoint of emptiness
You are not captivated by either extreme view

Child, when you realize the keys
Of the three principles of the path
Depend on solitude and effort
And quickly reach the final goal

15. Vajrasattva Purification Practice

There is no negativity that cannot be purified. The purification process is basically a psychological one. As Lama Yeshe says, it is our mind (and on the basis of that our actions) that create the negativity and it is our mind that transforms it by creating positive energy. Although, in Buddhism, we rely on Buddha's methods for the purification, it is not as if it is Buddha purifying us or forgiving us; we ourselves, as Lama says, do the work. We purify by applying, the Four Opponent Powers.

The four types of karmic results that the Four Opponent Powers purify:

1. The power of regret purifies the experience similar to the cause, which, let's say for killing, is to get killed, to die young or to get sick.
2. The power of reliance, Refuge and bodhicitta purify the environment result, which for killing is living in a place where the food and medicine are not conducive to good health.
3. The power of the antidote, in this case the visualization and recitation of mantras – or whatever action one does as the actual antidote – purifies the throwing karma that causes birth in the lower realms.
4. The power of the promise or determination not to do again purifies the action similar to the cause, which in a sense is the worst result: it's the habit to keep killing, which propels one back into the lower realms.

The practice:

Prostrate three times then sit on your cushion. Bring your mind to a quiet state. Start the purification with the first of the Four Opponent Powers.

1. The Power of Regret: Sincerely regret, from the depths of your heart, anything you have done to harm any living being, on this day, in this life, in all past lives. It is good to contemplate the various actions that you remember having done, and then to regret all the things as well that you don't remember. The reason to regret is based on the understanding of karma: we cannot bear the thought of the future suffering that we ourselves will experience due to the harm we have done to others. We experience everything due to our past karma, our past actions; so having harmed others we ourselves will necessarily experience suffering in the future. And who wants that? We know from the present suffering that we do not want it, so the logic is, therefore, to clean up our act before the present seeds ripen as future suffering.

2. The Power of Reliance: There are two parts to this step: one, we rely upon the doctor whose medicine we will take to purify our deluded actions, in this case the Buddha. It's not that we need Buddha to forgive us; rather, we rely upon him by using his methods to purify ourselves. Two, we also rely upon others beings, the very beings we have harmed, by developing compassion for them. We make the wish to purify for their sakes: all those we have harmed in this life and in the past. Make a strong aspiration to do this practice of purification so that from now on we can only benefit others, not harm them.

Visualize Vajrasattva above the crown of your head. He is your guru manifesting in this aspect for your benefit: this is important. He is made of radiant, blissful white light. He's sitting cross-legged on a white lotus, which although born out of mud is untainted by mud, just like our enlightened potential, which is born out of our delusions but is untainted by them. His face is radiant and beautiful. His eyes are long (horizontally) and peaceful and full of love and compassion for us. His mouth is red and very sweet. His hair is black and held up in a top knot. His arms are crossed at his heart, left underneath the right; the left is holding a bell, which represents wisdom, the right is holding a vajra, which represents the indestructibility of compassion; their being crossed represents the union of these two, which symbolizes enlightenment itself: the development of infinite wisdom and infinite compassion. The main thing is to really feel the presence of this enlightened energy above your head, and to imagine that it is a mirror image of your own potential. Now, say a prayer of refuge in Guru Vajrasattva:

To the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha
I go for refuge until I am enlightened.
By this practice of meditating on Guru Vajrasattva
May I reach Buddhahood so as to benefit all sentient beings!

Now visualize that light goes out of Guru Vajrasattva's heart to all the ten directions and hooks the energy of the body, speech and mind of all the enlightened beings of the universe. This light comes back and dissolves into the heart of Guru Vajrasattva, who now embodies all their energy. He is even more brilliant and blissful than before.

3. The Power of the Antidote, which is the actual medicine, the doing of the actual practice of purification. There are three stages to the meditation, and it consists of visualization and recitation of mantra.

Purification of body: Guru Vajrasattva very compassionately sends powerful white nectar, like coming out of a hose very forcefully, from his heart. It enters

your crown chakra and pours into your entire body, filling you completely. It keeps coming and it forces out of your lower orifices all the harm you have ever done to any living being with your body in the form of inky liquid, which pours out of you and disappears into space, not one atom left. Feel completely purified. Recite the mantra the whole time.

(Until you learn it, just say it 3 times; when you know it easily, recite at least 7)

OM VAJRASATTVA SAMAYA MANU PALAYA /
VAJRASATTVA DENO PATITA / DIDO MAY BHAWA / SUTO KAYO MAY
BHAWA / SUPO KAYO MAY BHAWA / ANU RAKTO MAY BHAWA /
SARWA SIDDHI MEMPAR YATSA / SARWA KARMA SU TSA MAY /
TSITAM SHRIYAM KURU HUM / HA HA HA HA HO / BHAGAWAN /
SARVA TATHAGATA / VAJRA MA MAY MU TSA / VAJRA BHAWA MAHA
SAMAYA SATTVA / AH HUM PHAT!

Then feel so happy that your negativity of body is purified. Really imagine now that it is not possible that your body could do anything but benefit others; no way can it harm. Really want that.

Purification of speech: During the second stage of the visualization, Guru Vajrasattva very happily sends powerful nectar from his heart chakra again. It pours forcefully into your crown, filling your entire body, this time forcing up to the top of your body – like when water filling a dirty glass forces the junk to come to the top and to overflow – all the negativity of your speech: all the gossip and malicious speech and useless speech and lying and whatever. All is purified by this powerful nectar, leaving your body through the top orifices in the form of inky liquid, disappearing into space, not one atom left. Recite the mantra as you visualize this.

Again, feel so happy that your speech is now completely purified and that no way could you do anything but say something beneficial or useful or appropriate or kind to others. Really want that.

Purification of mind: Third, Guru Vajrasattva very compassionately sends this time light from his heart chakra. This powerful white light enters your crown chakra and fills your entire being, and just like when you turn on a light in a room the darkness is instantly dispelled, so too, just as the light hits your heart chakra, the darkness of the negativity of your mind, all the anger and violence and depression and resentment and jealousy and bitterness, etc., are all instantly dispelled, not one atom left. Recite the mantra as you visualize this.

Again, feel happy that all your delusions, which are the cause of the harm we do with our body and speech, are totally purified, gone, finished, and that no way is there any space in your heart now for anything but love and kindness and forgiveness and wisdom and bliss and compassion.

Purification of even the imprints of negativity of body, speech and mind: This time imagine that Guru Vajrasattva sends light again and it fills you completely and eradicates even the subtlest imprint of negative energy from your mind. (It's like once you removed the garlic from a jar, you still need to remove the smell.) Again recite the mantra.

Now feel you are completely purified, and feel very happy. Guru Vajrasattva is happy too.

4. The Power of the Promise: The fourth step in the purification process, and such an important one, is the determination not to harm with our body, speech and mind again. Without this, we keep doing the same old things; determination to not harm again is like a beacon that guides our body, speech and mind in new directions. If you can actually vow to not do certain actions again for the rest of your life, fantastic. But be realistic. If you can vow not to do them again for a year, a month, a day, even a minute – whatever is realistic. Then in general vow to make the effort to avoid the others. This determination not to do again is what gives us the strength to turn ourselves around.

Then, very happy, Guru Vajrasattva – your own guru manifesting as the Buddha Vajrasattva solely for your benefit – melts into white light and absorbs into your through your crown chakra. This energy of white light comes to your heart chakra and merges with your own very subtle consciousness, becoming oneness with you. Meditate on this union.

At the end of the meditation session dedicate all the merit, the positive energy, you have created by doing this purification to all living beings (say whichever prayers below you would like to say):

Through the merits of these virtuous actions
May I quickly attain the state of a guru-buddha
And lead all living beings, without exception,
Into that enlightened state.

May the supreme jewel bodhichitta
That has not arisen, arise and grow;
And may that which has arisen not diminish
But increase more and more.

Just as the brave Manjushri and Samantabhadra,too,
Realized things as they are,
I,too,dedicate all these merits in the best way,
That I may follow their perfect example.
I dedicate all these roots of virtue
With the dedication praised as the best
By the victorious ones thus gone of the three times,
So I might perform good works.

I dedicate whatever virtues I have ever collected
For the benefit of the teachings and of all
sentient beings, and in particular,for the essential teachings
Of venerable Losang Dragpa to shine forever.

In the land encircled by snow mountains
You are the source of all happiness and good;
All-powerful Chenrezig,Tenzin Gyatso,
Please remain until samsara ends.

You are Avalokiteshvara, great treasure of
Compassion not aimed at true existence,
And Manjushri, master of flawless wisdom,
As well as Vajrapani, destroyer of hordes of demons
Without exception, Tsong Khapa, crown jewel
Of the sages of the land of snows, Losang Dragpa,
At your feet I make requests.
May we not arise heresy even for a second
In the actions of the glorious guru.
May we regard whatever actions are done as pure.
[With this devotion] may we receive the blessings
Of the guru in our hearts.

In all my lives,through the victorious one, Lama Tsong Khapa,
Acting in person as the Mahayana guru,
May I never turn aside for even an instant
From the excellent path praised by the victorious ones.

In whatever way you appear, glorious guru,
With whatever retinue, lifespan, and pure land,
Whatever noble and holy name you take,
May I and others attain only these.

16. Lam Rim – The Gradual Path

Around 1000AD, northern India was a great center of Mahayana Buddhist activity and learning. The monastery of Nalanda produced many of the great Buddhist scholars, writers, and practitioners. Among these were Shantideva, who wrote “The Bodhisattva’s Way of Life,” Naropa, Shantarakshita, who founded the first monastery in Tibet, and Atisha, who was appointed to the royal library at Vikramashila after his studies at Nalanda. It was an age of amazing growth and learning, and Buddhism was a powerful force in India at the time. Eventually, Buddhism would come under great religious and political persecution in India and almost completely disappear from the land that gave it birth. It’s possible that most Buddhist knowledge and writing would have been lost from the world in general if not for Atisha.

At the time Atisha was at the royal library Vikramashila, Buddhism had been introduced about 200 years earlier in Tibet with the monastery founded by Shantarakshita. After its introduction, however, an evil Tibetan king named Lang Darma abolished the practice of Buddhism and set out on his own program of destroying it. After the death of Lang Darma, a tentative rebirth of Buddhist practice began in northern Tibet, but the line of knowledge had been broken and the practices were no longer pure. Along with this, a number of charlatans from India arrived claiming to be Buddhist masters and have miraculous powers, which only further confused people as to what real Buddhist practice was. Yeshe O, a king of western Tibet and a Buddhist himself, was saddened by the state of Buddhism in Tibet and wanted to revitalize it. He sent a group of Tibetans and a large amount of gold to India in order to seek out the greatest Buddhist teacher. He also told the members of this group to study Dharma and Sanskrit while they were in India, and many of them later became famous translators. King Yeshe O was delighted when they began sending translations of important Buddhist documents. When this group returned to Tibet, they advised the king that Atisha was a great teacher and considered by many to be a second Buddha, but he had thousands of disciples and many responsibilities in India, so it was unlikely he would want to leave and teach in Tibet.

Yeshe O had used most of his gold in funding the travels of the group that had just returned, so he needed to find more in order to invite Atisha to come and teach and support the revitalization of Buddhism in Tibet. On an expedition to search for more gold, Yeshe O was captured by a hostile, non-Buddhist king, who demanded a ransom of gold for the life of Yeshe O. Jangchub O, the nephew of Yeshe O, began trying to gather the gold needed to save his uncle’s life. When Jangchub O had gathered almost enough gold with great difficulty, he was allowed to visit his uncle in prison. Yeshe O told his nephew to not use the money for ransom. He would rather the gold be used for inviting Atisha to Tibet and restoring pure Buddhist practice.

Jangchub O sent a delegation to India. They met with Atisha, told him of the gold that had been raised and how Yeshe O had given his life so that the gold could be used for reintroducing pure practice in Tibet. Atisha reflected on how Dharma practice had deteriorated in Tibet and how many had suffered because of it. He decided to travel to Tibet and teach, but he had to leave in secret so that his many Indian disciples wouldn't try to stop him.

Atisha arrived in Tibet to find many eager students but a very fragmented body of knowledge. There was a real need for a comprehensive course that would combine teachings from all the traditions, knowledge of the complete path, and practices suitable for students at all levels of spiritual development. Atisha composed the "Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment" as an outline of all the topics needing to be covered in Buddhist study and practice. It is only two pages long, short enough to easily be memorized and carried around by any student, but it is a complete and concise guide. It directs the student in a systematic way to the different areas of the body of teachings.

Lama Tsong Khapa later wrote the "Gradual Path to Enlightenment" (Lam Rim Chen Mo) as an actual compilation of all the teachings outlined by Atisha in "Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment." It was completed in 1402 near Reting, Tibet, and remains the most comprehensive study guide to Buddhist practice. It brings together the essence of Theravadin, Mahayana, and Tantra as well as being a practical guide to putting the scriptures into practice in daily life for students at any level.

Many prayers in Tibetan Buddhism are lam rim prayers, compact outlines of important points. Many of the individual prayers contain all the elements of a complete lam rim practice: taking refuge, generating bodhicitta, making offerings, and practice (mantra, visualization, purification, tong-len, etc.). A daily but consistent Lam Rim practice or even a daily recitation of a lam rim prayer is a practical way to refresh ourselves about what we believe, , what we are trying to do in our lives on a step-by-step basis, and what we aspire to do. Even a short lam rim practice, 15 minutes a day, every day, is more beneficial than intermittent bursts of strenuous practice. This is an approach that is suitable for everyone, a gradual but well-organized approach that builds upon itself.

17. Tantra - The Swift Path

The lam rim is the gradual path, guaranteed through gradual progress and suitable for any student. There may be those in the course of their practice who become interested in tantra, the swift path, as a way of speeding up their development. Tantra is quicker than lam rim, but it is also more dangerous, arduous, and not suitable for everyone.

Tantra is dangerous because it involves practices that transform negative energies into positive ones. The negative energies are very strong, as we already know from the problems that anger, attachment, sexual desire, jealousy, and greed already cause us. Tantric practices recognize the power of these energies and instead of trying to subdue them, channels them in a different direction. The negative emotions become fuel for spiritual practice instead of stumbling blocks, and this speeds up the process of attaining enlightenment. It is tempting to want to jump into tantric practice as a shortcut, but a commitment to tantric practice should be approached carefully and not taken lightly. A lineman on a power pole can manipulate massive amounts of energy to give light to a whole neighborhood. He can also easily kill himself if he isn't careful or doesn't have the proper skills.

Tantra is not a shortcut. It requires even more commitment and spiritual work than lam rim. It involves more advanced and complex practices and there are more consequences for not keeping vows or completing practices. Tantra does not cut down on the amount of practice you have to do. Since tantra is founded on the preliminary practices, these must be maintained as well. Tantric practice flows from a full understanding of the basic practices and must stay connected to them.

Tantra can only be practiced under the guidance of a fully qualified teacher who will decide which, if any, practices you are ready for. For each type of practice, an empowerment or initiation is required. The practice is transmitted directly from teacher to student, though it may be from a different teacher but with the permission of the personal teacher. The details of the practice are given and permission is given to do the practice (often with a commitment to a large number of completed practices), but whether the transmission of mental energy necessary for the practice occurs depends on the mind of the student. An awakening of the mind is not guaranteed.

Bodhicitta plays a crucial in tantra. Philosophically, bodhicitta and emptiness are the same in tantra and lam rim, but the approaches to developing them are very different. Students following lam rim practices travel pretty much the same path, but teachers may lead students in many different ways in tantric practice. Tantra is an invitation to practice at a different level, so the progress depends on the practitioner. Tantric practices should not be discussed with those who haven't received the initiation.

18. Daily Practice

Learning Buddhist philosophy and believing Buddhist concepts do not make you a Buddhist. What is in your heart and mind and what you do as a result of that are what make you a Buddhist. The work you do with your mind must be carried out in your everyday life. Progress on the Buddhist path is the responsibility of the individual and our practice is training for the kind of people we want to become. We want to become more loving and kind, more ethical, wiser, and less self-involved so we can develop our full potential.

We recognize that there are things about us that we need to change, but we also need to recognize it is possible to change and make a commitment to making the change happen. We know from our own experience that we are unstable. Our emotions fluctuate wildly with no control from happiness to anger and despair. We fall prey to our own obsessive thoughts. We are easily frustrated and dissatisfied. Just stabilizing our raucous minds would be such a relief and bring so much peace. This is where we begin practice, with gradually taming the mind and directing it in new ways.

We should be willing to commit to some kind of daily practice and set up a routine as a daily reminder of what we are trying to accomplish. It doesn't need to be elaborate. A short, simple practice in the morning and evening can be of great benefit if it is done consistently. It's also a good idea to set up a meditation space and a home altar as part of the daily practice.

An altar doesn't need to be elaborate or expensive, but it should be in an out of the way place, a separate room if possible. An altar should not be used as anything else, like a coffee table. It can be small but should be clean and treated with respect. The altar should contain representations of the Buddha's body, speech, and mind. The body is usually represented by a statue or picture, and should be centrally located. Speech is represented by books or texts that contain teachings and prayers (and these can be in any language). The mind is usually represented by a stupa, and a photo of a stupa is acceptable. All the artifacts on the altar should be regarded with equal respect despite differences in artistic quality. It is what the objects represent and not the objects themselves that is important.

There should be a space on the altar for offerings. Any object pleasing to the senses can be offered; flowers, incense, candles, food, etc. Flowers should be removed from the altar when they are no longer fresh. Food may be left on the altar for three days and is then considered blessed. It can be eaten but should not be thrown away.

Traditional Tibetan altars generally have seven bowls for water offerings. The bowls should be in a straight line across the front of the altar and be close, almost touching each other. They are filled with fresh water almost to the top, to "the width of a grain of rice." Each bowl of water represents a different type of offering. From left to right, they represent:

1. water to drink
2. water for washing the feet

3. flowers
4. incense
5. light
6. perfume
7. food

Water bowls should be removed from the altar in the evening. The water can be used to nourish plants or poured on the ground in a place where people don't walk, but should not be poured down the drain. All offerings placed on an altar can be blessed by repeating OM AH HUM three times.

A good daily practice can consist of taking refuge and generating bodhicitta with lam rim prayers and meditations and a Vajrasattva practice in the evening. This helps us to set our intention at the beginning of the day and clear away any negativities at the end of the day. All of us can spare 15 or 20 minutes twice a day for something that will impact the all the areas of our lives. The point, though, is to make your practice consistent and integrate what you learn into your daily life. Reading books is not enough, so go ahead and make a commitment to a better and more meaningful life.

Daily Prayers

Taking Refuge and Generating Bodhicitta (repeat three times)

I go for refuge until I am enlightened
To the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Supreme Assembly
Through the Virtuous merit I create
By practicing giving and the other perfections
May I attain enlightenment
In order to benefit all sentient beings

The Four Immeasurable Thoughts

May all sentient beings have happiness and its causes
May all sentient beings be free from suffering and its causes
May all sentient beings never be separated from sorrowless bliss
May all sentient beings abide in equanimity,
Free from bias, attachment, and anger

Refuge in the Guru (repeat three times)

The Guru is Buddha
The Guru is Dharma
The Guru is Sangha also
The Guru is the originator of all happiness
To all Gurus I go for refuge

The Seven Limbs

Reverently, I prostrate with my body, speech, and mind
And present clouds of every type of offering, actual and imagined
I declare all my negative actions accumulated since beginningless time
And rejoice in the merit of all holy and ordinary beings
Please remain until the end of cyclic existence
And turn the wheel of Dharma for living beings
I dedicate my own merits and those of others
To the great enlightenment

Short Mandala Offering

This ground, annointed with perfume, strewn with flowers

Adorned with Mount Meru, the Four Continents, the sun and the moon
I imagine as a buddha-field and offer it
May all living beings enjoy this pure land

Inner Mandala Offering

The objects of my attachment, aversion, and ignorance
And my body, wealth, and enjoyments
Without any sense of loss, I offer this collection
Please accept it with pleasure
And bless me with freedom from the three poisons

IDAM GURU RATNA MANDALA KAM NIRYA TAYAMI

Dedication

(from Shantideva's "Bodhicharyavatara")

May all beings everywhere
Plagued by sufferings of body and mind
Obtain an ocean of happiness and joy
By virtue of my merits

May no living creature suffer,
Commit evil or ever fall ill
May no one be afraid or belittled
With a mind weighed down by depression

May the blind see forms
And the deaf hear sounds
May those whose bodies are worn with toil
Be restored on finding repose

May the naked find clothing
The hungry find food
May the thirsty find water
And delicious drinks

Whatever suffering sentient beings have
May I experience it
Whatever merit I have accumulated
May others experience it

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