

**MAHAMUDRA
AND HOW TO
FACE DEATH
WITHOUT FEAR
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1. MAHAMUDRA IS BEYOND WORDS

LAMA YESHE

THE GREAT SEAL: EMPTINESS

According to Tibetan Buddhism, mahamudra is one of the most advanced teachings of the Buddha. *Mahamudra* is Sanskrit: *maha* means “great” and *mudra* can be translated as “seal.” When you lend me one hundred dollars, we make a contract and we seal it, don’t we? It shows: “Next year I have the obligation to pay you back.” You have the document as a guarantee.

However, *this* seal, this great seal, is not a physical seal made in a factory. It is the universal reality of emptiness, nonduality, non-self-existence. It exists in all phenomena, including sentient beings. It is also not some made-up philosophical concept. It doesn’t matter whether you accept it or deny it. If I say, “I don’t believe there is an earth; I don’t believe there is a sun,” who cares? Even though I reject the existence of the sun, I’m standing in the rays of the sun. Even though I deny the existence of the earth, I’m standing on the earth.

The reality of nonduality is inescapable. It is the inborn nature of all phenomena. It exists equally in all things: organic, nonorganic, permanent, impermanent, including all beings. It exists always within us. The name we give it is *mahamudra*.

MAHAMUDRA BRINGS YOU BEYOND FEAR

The trouble is we totally believe in *exactly* the opposite of nonduality. We grasp at a dualistic me—a self-existent, real, separate me. We’ve been grasping at it since we were in our mother’s womb—actually, the belief in this simultaneously-born ego has been with us since beginningless time. It’s beyond intellectual. Even ants and dogs have it.

And, as the great Mahayana scholar Chandrakirti points out, this primordial belief in a separate “me” creates the concept of “other”—

and from this tremendous gap comes the evolution of all of samsara, the cycle of existence.

To knock out this hallucinated vision, we must realize mahamudra, nonduality. The realization of mahamudra cuts the wrong conceptions and destroys the nuclear energy of ego. This is revolutionary—more revolutionary than any political ideology. And it brings you totally beyond fear: mahamudra is the antidote to fear. So beautiful!

TWO APPROACHES TO REALIZING EMPTINESS

Perhaps you're thinking that if mahamudra is about emptiness, then you have heard it many times before. You're right; the teachings are not so different. But the unique approach of the mahamudra way of presenting the universal reality of consciousness is the emphasis on meditation—the *experience* of emptiness rather than the explanation of what it means.

In the text I am using here, the *Precious Geden-Kagyu Mahamudra*, Panchen Lama Losang Chokyi Gyaltsen says there are two approaches to realizing emptiness:

Between the two approaches of (1) seeking meditation on the basis of the view and (2) seeking the view on the basis of meditation, the explanation here follows the second approach.

We usually hear that Lama Je Tsongkhapa, founder of our Gelug lineage, says that first we should study, then analyze, then meditate. In other words, we should “seek meditation on the basis of the view.” But Panchen Lama, one of the Gelugpas’ foremost figures and an expert in Lama Tsongkhapa’s tradition, is saying here that we can meditate first, *then* seek mahamudra, emptiness—“seek the view on the basis of meditation.”

Which is right? Well, both are right. But here we are following the second approach.

THE FIRST APPROACH: LEARN ABOUT EMPTINESS FIRST, THEN MEDITATE

We used the first approach when I studied in the monastery. We read so much, memorizing and reciting and debating philosophical texts every day. Buddhist philosophy is so sophisticated, so intellectual, involving highly complex thinking. I thought that if I understood all the philosophy, the middle way, everything, I'd knock out the ego. I thought about that a lot. I checked, checked, checked—and then I realized my conception was not true. I was shocked! I realized that even if I knew all the Buddhist texts and understood them intellectually, it would never touch my heart unless I meditated.

When we learn the words alone, there is no satisfaction; the problem of ego is not solved. And now I look at many of my students: they read so many books! All the philosophy, the psychology, so much information. All this reading, reading, reading!

Of course, with this approach we must also meditate. Lama Tsong Khapa talks about the union of the three wisdoms that arise from hearing, analyzing, and meditating; in Tibetan we say *trojung*, *sangjung*, and *gomjung*. But people sometimes misinterpret this. They hear that we Gelupas study for twenty or thirty years and think it means that first you listen for twenty years, then check for another twenty years, then, finally, penetrate in meditation. In fact, from the beginning we integrate these three wisdoms—we practice them simultaneously—and at each stage of our development it's a question of proportion.

Nevertheless, there is the danger that your knowledge will remain merely intellectual. If you don't go beyond the intellectual level, your mind will not be transformed. It's as if the knowledge stays in the books and you are separate from it. You can never get rid of ego this way. You end up missing the point.

THE SECOND APPROACH: MEDITATE FIRST, THEN DISCOVER EMPTINESS

It is extremely difficult to knock out the ego. You cannot seek the ego's projections philosophically, with your intellect. When you practice mahamudra, intellect is the enemy. You have to go beyond the intellect—you have to meditate. Then real transformation can come.

We have to understand, Buddha Maitreya said, that the relative Dharma, everything in the books, is like a bridge. A bridge is helpful for crossing a river, but once you've crossed it, it's "Goodbye bridge!" isn't it? You have to touch the heart. Once you've experienced the fundamental nature of your own consciousness, it's goodbye to all the philosophical concepts.

Philosophy is the equipment we use to reach *beyond* the bondage, but still it is bondage, isn't it? I'm not trying to be revolutionary! Of course, the philosophy is *good*, it is unbelievably profound, we should respect it. But we are seekers, and we can make mistakes, we can interpret the teachings wrongly. So we need to develop the skill to go *beyond* philosophy. We should not be afraid to go beyond it!

When the great yogis Milarepa and Lama Tsongkhapa went into retreat in the mountains, they didn't bring their books with them; they went beyond scripture, beyond ink, beyond Parker pens. And even as a boy, Lama Tsongkhapa meditated and communicated directly with Manjushri, the buddha of wisdom. So it is definitely possible first to meditate and then discover emptiness. This is the approach here.

Mahamudra is a super, incredible method. This is the experience of the lineage lamas, all the great yogis and yoginis. They all realized mahamudra in meditation.

Excerpted from Lama Yeshe's Mahamudra: How to Discover Our Own True Nature, Wisdom Publications 2018.

2. WE NEED TO CUT OFF ATTACHMENT

LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

ATTACHMENT IS SUFFERING

Not following attachment is practicing Dharma; following attachment is not practicing Dharma. It is as simple as that. The whole point of Opening the Door of Dharma, these instructions from the holy mouths of the Kadampa geshe, which they practice and experienced, is to cut off the eight worldly dharmas, to be free of attachment clinging to this life. Whether you are practicing Dharma or not, the thought of the eight worldly dharmas is the source of all obstacles and problems. Everything undesirable comes from this thought of the worldly dharmas.

When you are told that you have to give up attachment, you feel as if you are being told to sacrifice your happiness. You give up attachment, then you don't have happiness and you're left with nothing. Just yourself. Your attachment has been confiscated; you have been robbed of your happiness; and you are left there empty, like a deflated balloon. You feel as if you no longer have a heart in your body, as if you have lost your life.

This is because you have not realized the shortcomings of attachment. You have not recognized that the nature of attachment is suffering. Attachment itself is a suffering, unhealthy mind. Because of attachment, the mind hallucinates, and you are unable to see that there is another happiness, real happiness.

For example, when there is attachment for an object and enjoyment of it, you label this experience "happiness," and it appears to you as happiness, but in reality it is only suffering. As you keep doing the action, such as eating food, your happiness doesn't increase but only decreases. As your stomach becomes full, your happiness then becomes the suffering of suffering. Before the suffering nature of the action is noticeable, it appears to be happiness; but when it is

noticeable, it becomes the suffering of suffering. When the suffering was not noticeable, the feeling was labeled “pleasure” and appeared as pleasure, but as you continue the action, the feeling gradually becomes suffering.

The peace you experience by abandoning attachment leads you to nirvana, the sorrowless state. This peace, which is the absence of attachment, allows you to develop completely, to become enlightened. You can experience this peace forever. From the very first time you free yourself from thought of the worldly dharmas, from attachment, you begin to develop this peace in your mental continuum, and eventually you experience it forever.

If you feel that by sacrificing attachment you are sacrificing your happiness and are left with nothing, remember that all your problems are based on attachment and thought of the worldly dharmas. Not knowing that the nature of attachment is suffering, you cannot see that there is a better happiness. You cannot see that by sacrificing thought of the worldly dharmas, by freeing your mind of attachment, there is real peace, real happiness. This happiness doesn't depend on any external sense objects; it is developed within your own mind. With your mind you can develop this peace.

For example, let's say that you have a skin disease that makes you itch. You scratch yourself so much to relieve the itch that you make sores. Rather than labeling pleasure on the relief that scratching the itch gives you, wouldn't it be better not to have any disease at all? Wouldn't it be better to give up the disease? Having attachment is like having this skin disease.

If there were no attachment, there would be no cause for all the problems that arise from attachment. There would be no evolution. If we didn't have this body, this samsara, caused by delusion and karma and contaminated by the seed of disturbing thoughts, we wouldn't have to experience hot and cold, hunger and thirst, and all the other problems. We wouldn't have to worry about our survival, or spend so much time and money looking after our body. We are kept busy just keeping this body looking good. From our hair down to our toes, we

put so much work into decorating this body. So much of our precious human life is spent on that. When you get sick, however, even taking medicine cannot always cure you. So, wouldn't it be better not to have this body, this samsara, at all? Then you wouldn't have to experience all these problems.

Without attachment, there would be much peace in the mind – a peace that could be developed and completed. This work has an end. Seeking samsaric pleasure in dependence upon external objects of attachment is work that has no end. No matter how much you work towards that goal, it has no end. Like waves in the ocean coming one after the other, that work never ceases.

First of all, temporal happiness, which is dependent on external sense objects, is in the nature of suffering; and second, no matter what you do, there is no way to finish the work for temporal happiness.

LESS ATTACHMENT, LESS PAIN

As Nagarjuna explains in the verse that Dromtonpa often recited:

Acquiring material things or not acquiring them; happiness or unhappiness; interesting or uninteresting sounds; praise or criticism: these eight worldly dharmas are not objects of my mind. They are all the same to me.

It is easy to understand how it can be a problem not to acquire things, to be unhappy, to hear uninteresting sounds, to have a bad reputation, to be criticized. These are commonly recognized as problems. But you might not recognize acquiring things, having comfort and happiness, hearing interesting sounds, having a good reputation and being praised as problems. However, they are all the same; they are all problems.

But the object itself is not the problem. Having wealth is not the problem. So, what is the problem? The problem is the mind desiring and clinging to wealth – that is the problem. Having a friend is not

the problem; the mind clinging to the friend makes having a friend a problem.

Attachment makes having these four – material things, comfort, interesting sounds, praise – a problem. If there's no attachment, no worldly concern, having or not having these objects does not become a problem.

You might be sleeping comfortably one night when suddenly your sleep is disturbed by a mosquito biting you. If you have strong worldly concern, strong attachment for comfort, you will be very annoyed at being bitten by the mosquito. Just being bitten, by just one mosquito. It is nothing dangerous, nothing that can cause any serious disease. The mosquito takes just a tiny, tiny drop of blood from your body. But seeing that mosquito's body filled with your own blood, you are shocked. You become angry at the mosquito and are upset all night. The next day, you complain about the mosquito all day long, "I couldn't sleep for hours last night!" Losing sleep for one night, or even a few hours, is like losing a precious jewel. You are as upset as somebody who has lost a million dollars. For some people, even such a small problem becomes huge.

There are also people who attachment so much to be praised and respected by others. Now, if you ignore such a person and walk past them with your nose in the air, or say just one or two words disrespectfully, something that they don't expect to hear, it causes great pain in their mind. Or if you give them something in a disrespectful manner, whether purposely or not, again there is great pain. For such a person with so much expectation, so much clinging, the pain from even a small physical action that they dislike is great. It is like having an arrow shot into their heart.

Suddenly anger arises strongly. Suddenly their body becomes very tense. Their face, relaxed and peaceful before, now becomes kind of terrifying – swollen and tight, with their ears and nose turning red and the veins standing out on their forehead. Suddenly the whole character of the person becomes very rough and unpleasant.

The greater a person's attachment to receive praise and respect, the greater the pain in their heart when they don't get it. It is similar with the other objects of attachment. The stronger the attachment for material things, comfort, interesting sounds and praise, the greater the pain when one experiences the opposite.

If you expect that a friend will always be pleasant, smiling, respectful, kind, and always do what you wish, but one day they unexpectedly do some small unpleasant thing, that tiny thing causes an incredible pain in your heart.

All this is related to worldly concern, to how strongly you attachment something. The less attachment you have for the four desirable objects, the fewer problems you will have when you meet the four undesirable objects. Less attachment means less pain. If you cut off clinging to this life, there is no hurt when you experience criticism or do not receive something, because there is no clinging to praise or receiving things.

In the same way, when you do not cling to the expectation that your friend will always be nice to you, always smile at you, always help you when asked, there is no hurt when your friend changes and does the opposite to what you attachment. There is no pain in your heart. Your mind is calm and peaceful. By cutting off the attachment that clings to the four desirable objects, you don't have a problem when the four undesirable situations happen. They cannot hurt you, cannot disturb your mind.

Without this thought, there is so much calmness and peace in your mind that meeting the four undesirable objects doesn't bother you. And meeting the four desirable objects also doesn't bother you. If someone praises you, it doesn't matter; if someone criticizes you, it cannot disturb your mind. There is stability in your life, and peace of mind. There are no ups and downs. This is equalizing the eight worldly dharmas.

How do you keep your mind peaceful when problems happen? How do you protect your mind so that experiencing the four undesirable things does not disturb you? By realizing that clinging to

these four desirable objects is the problem. You have to realize the shortcomings of these four desirable objects and abandon clinging to them. This is the basic psychology. If you use this method, undesirable situations will not disturb you.

Geshe Chenngawa would equalize the eight worldly dharmas by reciting this verse:

Being happy when life is comfortable and unhappy when it is uncomfortable: all activities for the happiness of this life should be abandoned as poison. Virtue and non-virtue are functions only of the mind. Cut off non-virtuous motivations and those motivations that are neither virtuous nor non-virtuous.

The latter refers to actions of body and speech with indeterminate motivations; these are called “unpredictable” actions.

The best way to train our mind is to expect the four undesirable objects rather than the four desirable ones. Expect to be criticized and disrespected. This practice of renunciation, which cuts off attachment, is the best psychology. Having trained our mind to expect undesirable things, when something undesirable actually happens, because we are expecting it, it doesn’t come as a shock to us; it doesn’t hurt.

Before knowing about Dharma, before practicing meditation, you regarded discomfort, uninteresting sounds, criticism and not acquiring things as undesirable problems. Now, if you examine well the nature of the mind that clings to material things, comfort, interesting sounds, praise, you won’t find that it is happy; you will see that it too is suffering. It is not the happiness you thought it was before knowing about Dharma. It is not peaceful – it is painful.

The mind that clings gets stuck to the object of attachment. When you receive praise – “You are so intelligent,” “You speak so well,” “You understand Dharma so well” – your mind gets stuck to the praise and is no longer free. Like a body fastened with chains, the mind is fastened with attachment. The mind is tied, controlled,

chained by attachment. The mind is stuck like glue to the object. Or like a moth flying into melted candle wax: its whole body, wings and limbs become completely wrapped in the candle wax. Its body and limbs are so fragile that it is extremely difficult to separate them from the wax. Or like a fly that gets stuck in a spider's web: its limbs get completely wrapped, and it is very difficult to separate them from the web. Or like ants in honey. Attachment is the mind stuck to an object.

ATTACHMENT IS THE SOURCE OF ALL PROBLEMS

As Lama Tsong Khapa mentions in The Great Commentary on the Graduated Path to Enlightenment: “We follow attachment in the hope of getting satisfaction, but following attachment leads only to dissatisfaction.”

In reality, the result of following attachment is only dissatisfaction. You try again and again and again, but there is only dissatisfaction.

Following attachment and not finding satisfaction is the major problem of samsara. Having cancer or AIDS, for example, is not the main problem. Compared to the problem of following attachment and not finding satisfaction, cancer and AIDS are nothing; they don't continue from life to life. If you don't do something about the problem of attachment in this life, while you have a perfect human rebirth, it will continue from life to life.

Following attachment ties you to samsara continuously, so that again and again you experience the sufferings of the six realms. Again and again – endlessly. If you continuously follow attachment, there is no real satisfaction, no real peace. Following attachment leads you only to dissatisfaction and the continuous experience of the sufferings of samsara in one of the six realms.

It is thought of the worldly dharmas that brings again and again all the diseases that scare us so much. Again and again, from life to life, it brings all the serious problems that a person can experience; it creates the karma for us to experience these problems again and again. Thought of the worldly dharmas, attachment clinging to this

life, is the most serious disease. Compared to the worldly dharmas, other problems are nothing.

If you do not have thought of the worldly dharmas, which ties you to samsara, even if somebody kills you, all you do is change to another body. Your consciousness takes another perfect human body or goes to a pure realm. Your being killed is just a condition to change to another body. But if you have thought of the worldly dharmas and do not practice Dharma, even though no one kills you and you live to be a hundred, you constantly use your perfect human rebirth to create the causes of the lower realms; you use your fortunate rebirth to create the causes of unfortunate rebirths with no opportunity to practice Dharma. The longer you live, the more negative karma you create, which causes you to abide in the lower realms and experience suffering for many eons. Therefore, this thought of the worldly dharmas is much more harmful than some enemy who merely kills you.

Lama Tsong Khapa's quotation about following attachment continues: "Attachment brings so many other problems. Through following attachment, the mind becomes rough and unpeaceful."

Hundreds of problems come from dissatisfaction. When there is very strong attachment, it is very easy to become angry, for example. The stronger the clinging, the stronger the anger that arises. If you don't cling very much, you don't get so angry when someone upsets you. You might still be disturbed, but less. Anger, jealousy and so forth arise in relation to clinging. Because of clinging, these other negative thoughts arise. When any of these negative thoughts arise, you create negative karma, the cause of the lower realms.

When your mind is overwhelmed by attachment, completely clouded by attachment, you cannot meditate. Even if you have some idea of emptiness, for example, it is very difficult for you to have any feeling for it. At times when your mind is quiet and peaceful, you may have some feeling for it; but when your mind is clouded, a thick fog of attachment covering everything, you are unable to meditate on

emptiness. And you are unable to think of the shortcomings of attachment.

When you have strong attachment for an object, you become very unhappy if you can't be near it. You cannot relax; there is no physical relaxation because there is no mental relaxation. Even though you may not have any particularly hard work to do, since your mind isn't relaxed because of attachment, there is no physical comfort or relaxation.

There are many such examples of the shortcomings of attachment. Think of alcoholics and drug addicts. Their lives become so unhappy, so uncontrolled, that they cannot do anything. In particular, they damage their awareness and memory.

Disease comes from the dissatisfied mind of attachment, the evil thought of the worldly dharmas, because dissatisfaction creates the conditions for sickness. You are then sick for many years, with huge unwanted expenses of many thousands of dollars. When you can't get money in a proper way, you have to steal. Your mind becomes disturbed; you have a nervous breakdown and go crazy. You then have to spend so much time and money on psychiatric consultations, and you end up in an institution.

And the origin of all this? One moment of uncontrolled attachment. That one moment when you did not protect yourself from thought of the worldly dharmas, when you did not practice Dharma, brings so many problems. The problems go on and on for years and years, costing you a lot of money and making your life unnecessarily complicated and difficult. All these worries and expenses are caused by thought of the eight worldly dharmas. If, from the very beginning, you had kept yourself free of the worldly dharmas, all those years of unwanted problems and expenses would not have happened. You need never have experienced them.

When your attachment isn't fulfilled, when you can't get what you want, this is the time of nervous breakdowns and thoughts of committing suicide. Recently one Dharma student in Switzerland had problems like this and committed suicide. He hanged himself. I think

he had heard some Dharma teachings but hadn't done much practice or retreat. He had a very good job earning a lot of money, but he had relationship problems.

You may have had the experience many times of thinking about suicide, about ending your human life, because of these kinds of problems. Basically, this is the shortcoming of the worldly thought of attachment.

Kadampa Geshe Gonpawa, who had clairvoyance and many other realizations, said:

If one receives the four desirable results of comfort, material things, interesting sounds and praise from an action done with thought of the eight worldly dharmas, that is the only result in this life, and there is no benefit in future lives. And if the four undesirable results come from the action, there is no benefit even in this life.

Often, actions done with thought of the eight worldly dharmas that bring the four desirable results eventually lead to the four undesirable results anyway. For example, in business, you may have success after success; because of that success, you then act more and more with thought of worldly dharma. After some time your karma for success finishes, and the karma of failure is experienced. In one day you can become a beggar. One day, you are a millionaire; the next, you do not even know how you will pay your rent and take care of your family. Your whole life collapses.

This is due to doing actions with thought of the worldly dharmas. Even though you have achieved material comfort, you are not satisfied and continue to act with thought of the worldly dharmas. Because of your past success, one day your karma for success is exhausted, and everything collapses. Someone who was wealthy yesterday, with no financial worries, today suddenly has to worry even about such a small thing as how to take care of his family. He doesn't know what to do and is unable to eat or sleep.

Even if you successfully steal one, two, three times, for example, your success cannot continue indefinitely. You need to have some control over your attachment; you need to find some satisfaction. Otherwise, by continuing to steal, you will definitely get caught one day. No matter what the mistake is, by continuing to repeat it, one day it will definitely become a big problem. The shortcoming of attachment is that it eventually leads to so much that is undesirable.

Freeing yourself from attachment becomes a great protection. Cutting off clinging to an object or person means that all the other negative minds do not arise, and you don't create all those negative karmas as a result. It provides unbelievable protection. Normally, by clinging to a particular object, you create much negative karma in relation to many other sentient beings. By cutting off clinging, you stop the causes of the lower realms.

Great peace comes when you free yourself from the thought of attachment. Concentrate on this real peace that you can experience immediately by freeing yourself from attachment. When you focus on this, there is no problem. When you attempt to attain this greater happiness, this real peace, temporal happiness becomes uninteresting and not difficult to renounce; it's like picking up used toilet paper. Be aware of this, then there will be no danger of depression or of going crazy.

So, we can see, no matter how many problems we have, there is no choice: we have to practice Dharma. And practicing Dharma means controlling the mind, controlling attachment. Forget about living an ascetic life of pure Dharma practice; at the very least, for peace of mind and the happiness of this life, and to stop the increase of problems, we need to control attachment.

COLOPHON

Excerpted from Lama Zopa Rinpoche's Enjoy Life Liberated from the Inner Prison, enjoylifeliberatedfromtheinnerprison.com

3. THE BENEFITS OF SAMADHI ARE INCREDIBLE

LAMA YESHE

WITHOUT CALM ABIDING WE CANNOT REALIZE MAHAMUDRA

As I mentioned, to achieve the realization of mahamudra, the reality of nonduality, we first need to develop calm abiding. In fact, it is not possible without it. We must achieve the subtler levels of consciousness of indestructible one-pointed concentration, what in Sanskrit we call *samadhi*.

It is difficult to realize nonduality *not* because it's hiding from us but because our concepts are so thick. So we must refine, *refine* our concepts; we must achieve subtle mindfulness, subtle awareness, and subtle clarity. Otherwise, there is no way we can see the unconscious levels of ego grasping an independent self. Not possible!

Samadhi is the source of liberation. Without perfect samadhi, then, there is no *way* to become liberated from samsara and no *way* to achieve enlightenment. There is no exception: whether we are Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist, to cut the dualistic view we need calm abiding.

BUT CALM ABIDING IS NOT ENOUGH

On the other hand, some people actually think that this state of samadhi, this one-pointed concentration, is all we need in order to cut ego. But that is wrong. Lama Tsongkhapa reminds us that calm abiding alone is not enough to cut the dualistic view. We also need to develop special insight, or *vipashyana* in Sanskrit. In Tibetan we call it *lhagtong*—*lhag* meaning “extra” and *tong* meaning “seeing.” We can interpret this to mean that we go beyond seeing conventional reality and achieve the “extra seeing” of the universal reality of mahamudra.

In other words, we need the two kinds of meditation together: calm abiding and special insight.

THE BENEFITS OF SAMADHI ARE INCREDIBLE

Nevertheless, even without special insight, the results of samadhi alone are unbelievable, almost unimaginable. When we understand this, when we realize how amazing the results are, we cannot help but try to develop it. There is no way we become lazy; we will have much energy and make great effort. We won't even worry about eating.

I will explain some of the benefits.

YOU GO BEYOND SENSORY AND CONCEPTUAL CONSCIOUSNESS

As your concentration develops, you will go beyond your body. Your mind will be nonconceptual so it is *easy* to cut the complex world of the five sense objects, to eliminate the superstitions. In such a unified state, your mind becomes so subtle, so sharp, you can easily eradicate the complex dualistic thoughts; you can touch reality. This is the *feature* of samadhi.

And out of meditation you can *easily* deal with your delusions; they are so light, you can stop them immediately.

YOU EXPERIENCE BLISS

In the subtle state of concentration, you experience bliss—ecstatic bliss—just naturally. The more concentration you have, the more integrated you are, and thus the more rapture, the more bliss, you experience.

In the beginning, the bliss you experience is physical, which is the grosser level. But as your concentration deepens, as you throw off the layers of blankets of grosser consciousness, you experience bliss exclusively at the mental level. This is because you have stopped perceiving the objects of the five senses, you have closed the door to superstition. All the contradictory concepts have disappeared. Your mind is now crystal clear.

AS IF YOU COULD COUNT EVERY ATOM

As your concentration gets stronger and you reach ever-subtler levels, your mind becomes super powerful. From his own experience, Lama Je Tsongkhapa says that you can reach a point of such clarity in your meditation that your mind feels almost infinite.

Your mind is so clear, so sharp, it's as if you can distinguish all the subtle physical energies. You'll have the courageous thought, "I can count *all* the atoms of the universe!" This level of mind is more powerful than even scientific instruments. Now I think I'm showing pride in Buddhism!

YOU ARE ALWAYS JOYFUL

When you arise from your meditation you feel liberated instead of uncertain and full of doubts and conflicts. You experience inner peace; you always experience a happy, joyful vibration. In fact, you continuously experience tremendous pleasure—now the pleasure of chocolate is nothing to you! What you can now experience with your mind is super. It's like another realm, another dimension. And when your senses do come into contact with their objects, of course, you experience bliss then too.

You hardly even notice whether it's night or day. Actually, even now, when you have samsaric happiness, you have a similar kind of experience. You dance and drink all night, intoxicated with the pleasure: time just flies. "Oh, now it's morning already?" Well, this is what happens when you're intoxicated with the blissful experience of samadhi. And, of course, this shows that time is not fixed from the outside; it's made up by the mind.

YOUR BODY FEELS SO LIGHT

When you are out of meditation, the heavy energy of your body vanishes. Your body feels like a brand new body. You feel so light, almost as if you could fly, almost as if you had no body at all. To

some extent you can see this in your ordinary daily life. When your mind is satisfied, your body feels light, doesn't it?

YOUR SLEEP IS LIKE MEDITATION

Lama Tsong Khapa says that because you have developed such clarity in your concentration meditation, even in your dreams your experience of the superstitions, your conceptions about the five sense objects, will be much lighter. Your sleep will be like meditation. Normally we experience heavy impure projections in our dreams, but when we have good concentration we can experience pure visions.

YOU DEVELOP CLAIRVOYANCE

Lama Tsongkhapa says that you will develop clairvoyance. According to the Abhidharma teachings, there are two kinds of clairvoyance. One is what we understand as "intuition," an untrained sense that we all have to some extent. For example, you might feel strongly, without any logical proof, that something has happened to your dear friend back home.

The other can be gained by training the mind in meditation, as we are discussing here. You are able to see long distances, as well as other people, including their minds. At first, your experiences seem a bit like a dream, but the more your concentration develops, the more clearly you can see, just as you would if you were there in person. Maybe you can even touch far-away forms.

This kind of clairvoyance is not imagining something. It's real, in the present, not a fantasy. Normally, with your deluded thoughts, you create images of your boyfriend in your mind when he's not here, let's say, and it's almost as if he's real. But when it's clairvoyance, you literally see your boyfriend.

YOU MAY GET A TASTE OF NONDUALITY

At the subtler level of consciousness achieved in samadhi meditation, your wisdom will be so powerful, so sharp, just naturally. Automatically you will have some experience of nonduality, of

mahamudra, of no subject and object—because in this unified state of samadhi, the complex dualistic thoughts have temporarily ceased.

We could intellectually debate this. “How can you stop the superstitions? It’s not until you reach the tenth level of the bodhisattva stages that they have ceased. Yet here you are saying that if you reach certain levels of concentration you can achieve the experience of nonduality, non-superstition.”

Well, you can debate like this, yes. But when you understand these subtler levels of consciousness, you will see the logic of this assertion. Here we are talking about experience. At a certain point you have to abandon these philosophical arguments. When I received the mahamudra teachings from my guru, he said exactly this. I remember it! At first I didn’t understand; my misconceptions were so strong then.

YOU MAY EXPERIENCE SPACE-LIKE EMPTINESS

You may have an experience of space-like emptiness, because to some extent the superstitions, the heavy wrong conceptions, have stopped, as we have discussed. These superstitions are normally like a huge cloud that obscures the sky. But if you are sensitive, when the cloud disappears, when even just a little of these hallucinations, the misconceptions, have stopped, you automatically experience space-like emptiness.

YOU MAY EXPERIENCE THE DISSOLUTIONS

As a result of deep concentration it’s possible to bring the deluded energies—the winds and the delusions themselves—into the central channel. This is similar to what happens at death. You feel as if you’re disappearing; even the breath stops. Experiencing the various visions associated with the dissolution of the subtler energies is a sign of good concentration (as we will see in chapter 11).

If this happens, instead of being afraid, just let go; keep your awareness, your memory or mindfulness. At each stage in this dissolution process, the mind gets finer, subtler.

But if you become unconscious, that is not right.

YOU CAN GAIN THESE REALIZATIONS

Know that if you put effort into cultivating samadhi, you can gain these realizations. It's possible because of the simple power of habit. From the Buddhist point of view, every human being has the potential for clarity, for bliss, which eventually can lead to the experience of universal reality.

And, of course, the more you experience your own potential for clarity and bliss, the deeper your concentration becomes, and the happier you are to meditate. So, you must learn to turn on the switch of your own ecstatic blissful energy.

COLOPHON

Excerpted from the teachings of Lama Yeshe's Mahamudra: How to Discover Our Own True Nature, Wisdom Publications 2018.

4. BEFORE MEDITATING ON YOUR MIND, ESTABLISH WHAT IT IS

LAMA YESHE

THE CONVENTIONAL NATURE OF OUR MIND

Normally we meditate on Buddha's image, on the breath, or on other things, but in mahamudra meditation we contemplate our own mind, our consciousness. So, what is the mind? What are its characteristics?

From the Buddhist point of view, consciousness, or mind, has no substantial or physical characteristics. It has no color and no form. You could say it's like space. It has a clean-clear nature, clear-light nature. In Tibetan we call it *selshig rigpa*. *Sel* means "clear," *rigpa* means "to see," "to know." Exactly as Panchen Lama says, consciousness is "that which is clear and knowing." This clarity is its conventional, relative nature.

Consciousness perceives reality like a mirror does: it reflects. However, if a mirror is not clear—if it's dusty, let's say—it cannot reflect accurately, can it? An unclear mind cannot reflect reality either.

Yet even our dualistic concepts, our negative emotions such as desire and hatred, possess this clarity—this is why they can, to some extent, perceive their projections. A good example is water when it's boiling: it's turbulent, but still it possesses the same clear nature as water when it's still.

THE ULTIMATE NATURE OF OUR MIND

As we discussed before, delusions can be totally eradicated. Maitreya uses the example of tarnished gold. The tarnish is not in the character of the gold, is it? So it can be removed. It's the same with the mind: negativities are there, but because they are not in the nature of the mind they can be removed.

Here I'm talking relatively. Ultimately, then, there's no discussion about whether the mind is pure or not: it is absolutely pure. The mind has no trace of ego-nature. Its nature is clear light, nonduality, non-self-existence. In other words, the essential nature of our mind, of thought, of consciousness, is purity.

I'm not saying you're enlightened already; I'm not saying that. This purity is our buddha potential. This fundamental, clear-light nature of our mind exists always within us—it's a question of recognizing it.

THE MIND AND ITS OBJECTS

Fundamentally there are two things: our consciousness, which is the subject, and the world of sense objects—things, people, sounds, smells, and so on. Normally, we are distracted by the objects of our senses, aren't we? Most of the time the arising of our superstitions, our dualistic conceptions, is linked to the sensory objects, including sentient beings. According to Buddhism, our five senses have a bad reputation; they are the doorway to the superstitions, to the ego; they are set up to activate delusions. The moment we open our sense perceptions to the world, the reflections come, and then we conceptualize, categorize: this, that, this, that. This is the problem.

Say we're observing a person. Normally we are busy putting our projections onto them; we never observe our mind's *view* of the person, our thoughts about the person. As soon as the reflection of you comes into my mind and I start thinking you are this and that, my mind becomes disturbed, like a tornado. The reflection of you, the appearance of you, coming into my mind is not the problem. The problem is all my judgments about you. We need to throw out this habit!

HAPPINESS AND SUFFERING COME FROM OUR MIND

From the Buddhist point of view, all the circumstances of samsara and nirvana are manifestations of our mind. This is the central

understanding. All the suffering, the happiness, liberation, the highest realizations—all manifest from our consciousness.

Our day-to-day life is controlled by the mind. We can see this. When the wish to go to the beach arises, the thought of desire takes us to the beach. Maybe we're tired of Western society and want an easy life, no responsibilities, so we think, "Maybe I'll go to India." This thought takes us to India. Our grasping mind leads us wherever we go.

Or we change our opinions about things all the time. Let's say you're young and you get fed up with home and leave your country. You hate it! But then you go back years later, when your mind is more healthy, and now it's beautiful. Such contradictory experiences come from our mind, not the object—we know this. And this is the evidence of selflessness, isn't it?

This modern world is so complicated. Our daily life involves so much intellectualizing. We create all the thoughts of good, bad, black, white, the superstitions, all the artificial concepts. We build up all these dualistic concrete bricks. We overestimate everything, or we underestimate; we are so extreme, so unbalanced. The great yogi Shantideva said that our deluded mind is like a mad elephant, completely out of control. We need to control the mind, not have delusions control us.

As children our minds were more simple, more natural, and as we got older we acquired more and more concepts, more hallucinated projections, more fantasies; we repeat and repeat the good, bad, good, bad mantra. These are the hindrances that prevent us from touching our deepest human nature, from touching reality, our potential for eternal peace.

With mahamudra meditation, we can knock down these dualistic bricks and become more natural, more simple, more down to earth.

MEDITATING ON THE MIND IS NOT MAHAMUDRA, BUT IT LEADS TO IT

Using our own mind as the object of concentration is the unique characteristic of mahamudra meditation that makes it such a powerful method for eliminating our dualistic thinking. However, contemplating our own consciousness does not bring the actual realization of mahamudra—ultimate reality—because the mind is still relative reality. But it leads to it.

Using our own consciousness as the object of meditation leads to the experience of mahamudra because it brings an experience *similar* to mahamudra. Because mind is clean-clear in its nature, we can cut through the busyness of conceptuality, cut the gross dualistic thoughts, and begin to experience the clarity of our consciousness, its relative nature.

Eventually we unify the indestructible concentration gained in calm abiding meditation on this clarity with a subtle wisdom that analyzes the dualistic view, which leads to special insight, the realization of ultimate reality. This is the nucleus of the great yogi Lama Tsongkhapa's method for developing mahamudra.

In short, we start with concentrating on our own consciousness, and then we meditate on emptiness.

COLOPHON

Excerpted from the teachings of Lama Yeshe's Mahamudra: How to Discover Our Own True Nature, Wisdom Publications 2018.

5. MEDITATE ON YOUR MIND

LAMA YESHE

Maybe you're not sure what it means "to meditate on your mind." The mahamudra way is to concentrate on the clarity of your mind, its conventional nature. But we start by focusing on our concepts, the views of our own thoughts. In other words, in order to discover the clarity of our consciousness, the object of our meditation, we first observe the thoughts.

By becoming quiet, we purify the grosser levels of our consciousness—all the dualistic thoughts about good and bad, the worldly superstitions, the artificial concepts, the negative thoughts. This creates space. Whether you're confused or miserable, blissful or in some fantastic clear light experience, it doesn't matter. Simply watching the feelings, the views of your own mind, automatically leads to concentrating on the clarity of the mind.

We observe the thoughts, and then we let go. *No* intellect—we don't analyze our thoughts. Leaving the mind as it is like this is the special emphasis of this meditation. In our gradual-path meditations we analyze. But mahamudra meditation emphasizes *not* analyzing. Because when the mind is analyzing, it's trembling, shaking. It's like an airplane when it's turning; it shakes, doesn't it?

Lama Tsongkhapa says that when we contemplate the consciousness, we should not follow any object, such as form or color or sound, or even the image of a buddha, a mantra, a syllable. These we should abandon.

We refer to this approach as "nonconceptual," "non-superstitious." In Tibetan we say, *mitogpa kyongwa*: "maintaining a nonconceptual state of mind." I think this is very sensible, very logical. Of course, our habit to follow the five

sense objects is strong, so we need to learn to develop the skill in meditation to stay on the consciousness itself.

I think, for Lama Tsongkhapa, using our own consciousness as the object of concentration is a very sensitive, direct way to realize the universal reality of our mind, which *easily* eliminates the superstitions and confusion and—this is the *point*—*easily* leads to mahamudra, the realization of nonduality, emptiness.

THE TWO MAIN OBSTACLES IN MEDITATION

Countless obstacles prevent us from obtaining perfect concentration, but we can include them in two categories: one is distractedness and the other is sluggishness.

Distractedness Our mind becomes distracted, or wanders, because we're overwhelmed by our usual delusions: desire, anger, and the rest. And, of course, it also wanders because of laziness. We don't make enough effort to concentrate because we don't yet have enough understanding of the incredible benefits of concentration, like those discussed above. We understand really well the benefits of going to the supermarket—all that supermarket goodness! We understand the results of our samsaric activities, but they are nothing compared to experiencing our own clarity.

Gross sluggishness Sluggishness has both gross and subtle levels. Gross sluggishness, when our mind is cloudy or we feel like falling asleep, is more easily recognizable. There is a skillful way to stop it. As we are contemplating the clarity of our thoughts, we might have a slight impression of darkness: this is one sign of sluggishness. It's like when we're sitting outside on a sunny day and a light cloud moves across the sun. So in our meditation, the moment we get an impression of darkness, we need to adjust our object of meditation, making it a little clearer, a little stronger. We learn to develop the skill to know how to do this.

In your effort to make the object clear, clear, clear, however, you risk applying so much effort that you become totally distracted. It is possible to go too far. So be careful.

Subtle sluggishness When we reach a certain stage of very deep concentration, the major obstacle is subtle sluggishness, but it is very difficult to recognize. We can easily mistake subtle sluggishness for correct concentration. We can stay there, effortlessly, forever. That's dangerous. Some meditators think they have perfect concentration; there is no wandering, no superstition, no sensory feelings, only a very blissful experience. They feel, "This is fantastic! Someone could cut me with a knife and I wouldn't feel pain. Now I no longer have any sensory attachment."

Yes, the mind has indeed become subtler, but it is not fully mindful; there is no intensive wisdom. It's like sleeping. This is subtle sluggishness. Maybe for most of us it will be a long time before we need to worry about this danger!

NO NEED TO CLEAN THE MIND

Now let's practice. Just watch your thoughts. Maybe not *literally* watch—language is a problem. Be like the sunlight, which merely shines.

Normally we think our mind is bad, deluded, and that we have to make it clean. But mind's nature is clean-clear: clarity is a fundamental characteristic of mind. In Buddhism, this applies both in philosophy and in meditation. You don't need to make effort to make your mind this way or that; you just need to leave it alone. Its clear-light nature is pure from the beginning, and this nature exists forever.

If you can find the object to some extent, then just let go, let go. If you try too hard to make it bright, you will lose it, and distraction will come.

NO EXPECTATIONS

Abandon expectations, any hope, say, for a high realization. Abandon expectations of any kind, in fact. Just let go. Keep the concentration strong and be satisfied with that.

Losang Chokyi Gyaltsen says you should not “allow your conceptual mind to entertain any fears or expectations and enter equipoise without the slightest distraction.”

In other words, when you’ve reached a reasonably clean-clear point, without emotional disturbance, don’t start worrying or get too excited. No! Just leave it there.

AVOID EVEN POSITIVE CONCEPTS

Avoid all concepts, even positive ones such as, “How wonderful if all sentient beings can reach buddhahood!” That is not valid here. Even if you have a memory of your past life as some Himalayan yogi or you have some fantastic vision—even if the Buddha comes!—do not follow it. Let go of it immediately.

Don’t think that I’m trying to get you to forget about everything, your normal life. “Maybe I should just go to sleep and forget everything.” No! Panchen Lama mentions this: “It’s not the cessation of mental activity as when you faint or fall asleep.” In the development of concentration, all such thoughts are interferences. That is why you need to stop following them.

Because our habit to go to the form, the sound, the color, the smell, is so deep, we must use great skill to keep our awareness strongly on our consciousness. Keep mindfulness, or memory, continuously. Panchen Lama says:

Begin keeping watch with undistracted mindfulness,
and with alertness, make your mind attentive to any
movement.

We also have the habit to go to the past or the future; we get so distracted. We must break this habit, too. Remain focused on the clean-clear state of our own consciousness. The yogi Tilopa says to place the mind on the consciousness alone, without anything else. Eventually our muddy consciousness, our superstitions, will settle

and become clear. Continuous nonstop mindfulness is the resource of awareness.

LIKE THE SUN

Your consciousness is like the sun. Just like the sun's rays shoot out from the sun, our thoughts, our views—right views and wrong views—manifest from our consciousness. Whatever thought you experience, keep your mindfulness of it, continuously. That is the meditation.

LIKE SPACE

Your mind is like space. When the rain comes, the space is not disturbed. Rain falls, but still it's part of space. When the rain is strong, it's disturbing, but when it stops, things become quiet and peaceful again.

The rainfall is similar to your superstitions: when they are manifesting, it's disturbing, but they still have nonduality nature, still the original nature.

LIKE THE OCEAN

Your mind is like the blue ocean. It's there, you just watch it. Your thoughts are like the waves. Waves manifest from the ocean, but they are still part of the ocean. When a wave rises out of the ocean, there's some turbulence. When it drops back into the ocean again, it's not different from the ocean, is it?

LIKE THE FULL MOON

Your consciousness is like the full moon. On this earth all the people and fishes and chickens and trees—all the organic things—are moving, functioning. But the full moon is just there.

Your intensive awareness remains intensive awareness of consciousness, even though the distractions themselves are coming and going. They no longer energize you. They no longer

distract you. You remain on your thoughts with intensive mindfulness.

As Losang Chokyi Gyaltsen says, “Tighten by making taut and look nakedly at the nature of that which is clear and knowing”—your mind, in other words—and “recognize any conceptual thoughts that arise.”

LEARN TO LET GO

When you reach the point where you can experience the clarity of your consciousness, then try to let go. Keep your concentration a little loose rather than exerting tremendous effort. Don’t squeeze your mind. Too much effort, too strict discipline, is not good. You need to learn to let go.

Keep your mindfulness continuous and experience the clarity. When the mind is stable, let go. In this state, you experience quiet, joyfulness, even bliss.

“Let go” has many meanings. When you drive a car, for example, once you’re aware of the right speed, the overall situation, then you need to just let go, relax. When you relax you can enjoy the drive. It’s almost as if the car is flying, isn’t it? But new drivers can’t do that. They’re always trying to adjust things; they’re too nervous, too tense.

It’s the same with new meditators. You have to learn to let go. If you don’t know how to let go, you can never experience bliss. When you try too hard, you get headaches and high blood pressure, and eventually you hate meditation. Just the sight of your meditation cushion makes you want to go nowhere near it! So learning to let go is extremely important.

When you know how to let go, the root text says, you will be liberated from superstition. “When mind bound in a tangle is relaxed, without doubt it frees itself.” When you know how to let go, you taste the blissful chocolate cake of meditation. Then each time you go to meditate, you will enjoy it.

DON'T REJECT DISTRACTIONS

Don't feel bad when distractions come. Don't get upset and reject them. There's no need to think, "Oh, this is ego. It is bad." Recognize that these deluded thoughts, the dualistic thoughts, the superstitions, are simply a manifestation of your consciousness. Look at the essential nature of the thoughts: they are also clear in their nature, as we discussed. When they come, instead of rejecting them, look, then penetrate into their essential nature.

Or think that the thoughts are like the birds, the airplanes, all the organic things that move in the space of your consciousness; they come and they go. Just let go. You can use your awareness to watch the essence of the superstitions; you don't need to lose the awareness. Panchen Lama says that you should

recognize as movement [of the mind] whatever conceptual thoughts are generated, and without blocking them, focus on their nature.

IF TOO DISTRACTED, RELAX AND WATCH THE BREATH

If the distractions are too strong, it's better to stop the meditation on the consciousness and do the nine-round breathing meditation. Or you can simply watch the breath. Breathing meditation is simple. Breathe, but don't think about the breathing. Using the breathing techniques, we can help our super-sensitive schizophrenic mind calm down so that we can again contemplate the clear mirror of our own consciousness.

Sometimes people don't know how to breathe, and that creates tension. Notice that when you are sad or depressed, you sigh deeply, don't you? Breathing is very important for health. You should be sensitive to the movement of your breath. Breathing well can even energize bliss, while breathing wrongly can cause problems.

These techniques can quickly cut the gross levels of the superstitions, and soon you'll reach a point where your mind is more neutral and you can go back to the clarity of your mind.

PERSEVERE. AND BE SATISFIED

It's important to put energy into the practice from the beginning. And to not give up. The Vinaya texts illustrate this with an example: If you want to make fire by rubbing two sticks together, you have to be persistent. You can't just give up and then start over; it will never work. It's the same with your concentration.

Lama Tsongkhapa emphasizes that when you get some experience of clarity, be satisfied. Don't think, "Oh, this not enough clarity; this is not what my lama means." You understand? You're over-intellectualizing. You need to discover what is right through experience; don't go by mere words.

Perhaps you have special experiences in meditation, and then they go away. Don't be disappointed. They are valuable. They are *your* experience. It has nothing to do with intellect, nothing to do with the books, nothing to do with my words. It's important to recollect these experiences. They show you what you can achieve. At other times you can have perfect experiences, but you don't recognize them. You just throw them into the garbage.

When I do retreat, I have some experiences too—small experiences. When I recollect my retreat, I am satisfied. I am not saying I have great experiences, but they're good enough. I think all of us can have moments of bliss—or even of simply not being disturbed by the concepts. That's super! Remember these times. They're *your* experiences, not anyone else's.

RETAIN THE CLARITY OUTSIDE OF MEDITATION

With mahamudra you don't need to do anything formal. The clarity of your mind is with you twenty-four hours a day, so it's possible to retain the experience during your breaks as well. You use your mindfulness and leave your mind on the clarity of your own thoughts.

This is very simple. You can apply it in any situation: while you're drinking tea, while you're eating, walking, talking—even while you're

dreaming. Part of your mind is always aware of the clarity of the thoughts.

Normally, you're busy with your fantasies, transfixed by your thoughts and ideas. Or you're always thinking, "Oh, I'm so confused," and there's no sense of clarity. But the clarity of your mind is always accessible. It makes no difference whether you are feeling confused or miserable, blissful or fantastically clear. All these feelings are your mind, and they are clear in their nature.

Every situation can become a meditation. Just watch your own mind, the views moving through your mind. When your emotions are strong, instead of focusing on the object, the person, focus on the mind itself. Sit back and observe the clean-clear nature of the feelings themselves. Instead of making your mind busy with the dualistic judgments about the person or other external things, simply keep your mindfulness on the subject, on mind itself.

At a certain point you will become clear. You keep your mindfulness on whatever's arising, and you let go, without intellectualizing or analyzing. Okay?

This is beautiful. Whatever situation you're in, you immediately remember the clarity. Once you've developed this habit, you can bring it into any situation. You're developing mindfulness. That's what concentration meditation is.

COLOPHON

Excerpted from the teachings of Lama Yeshe's Mahamudra: How to Discover Our Own True Nature, Wisdom Publications 2018.

6. HOW DO WE EXIST?

LAMA YESHE

WE'RE JUST A NAME

The way we exist is in accordance with the view of the great second century Indian yogi Nagarjuna. This combination of the five aggregates – form, feeling, discrimination, non-associated compounded phenomena, and consciousness – is given a name. The name is a label, given by a concept. That is enough. That is the reality, conventional reality. *No more.*

But the characteristic of ego-mind is that it's always dissatisfied with that reality, and ego-mind – perhaps it's better that we say “ego-wisdom,” because in a sense ego is so intelligent, so skillful – completely knocks out our reality.

You can also say we're a combination of the six elements – the usual four plus consciousness and space. To these elements a name is given. Just a name touches this combination: this is the conventional reality. The name comes from the mind; the mind looks at this combination, then gives it a name, a label. It doesn't matter how important you hold it be, that's the way it exists; no more than that. I mean it: *no more!*

The root text quotes Nagarjuna:

The individual is not earth, is not water.
Is not fire, is not wind, is not space,
Is not awareness, it is not all of these.
Yet, what individual is there, other than these?

In other words, if you go looking for something more among each of the six elements, no way can you find anything there, either. In Buddhist terminology, this is the meaning of “conventional”: in itself a phenomenon is not absolute. But the ego holds things as

absolute. Ego *wants* absolute me. We hold on to an absolute I, which is totally non-existent. There is no absolute I; and nor are there absolute six elements. There aren't, scientifically.

When we understand this we'll see that if something *were* existing from its own side, it couldn't change. Nothing exists like that!

EGO EXAGGERATES

Ego wants, ego *wants*. When it's summertime in Melbourne and it's a hundred degrees, the ego wants absolute-reality Coca-cola. Coca-cola becomes the absolute solution. This view is totally wrong; it's an exaggeration. Coca-cola does have a relative, conventional, artificial quality, but how can you say it is absolute?

When the ego-mind perceives something, there is no room to accept it *as it is*; ego-mind has to go beyond the relative way that the thing exists.

For this reason, Buddhism emphasizes the understanding of interdependence, dependent-arising, as the logic to prove non-duality, non-self-existence. To some extent we do understand this.

THERE IS NO SCOTT

Take Scott, for example. We give the name "Scott" to the group of six elements sitting here. There is a combination here and then we say the name, "Scott."

There are three things involved in this process: your mind, the name, and then the conventional reality of Scott's six elements. Okay, there must be some reason we say "Scott"; there *is* some reason; always there is some reason. But that reason is superficial; there is no absolute quality at all. We merely give the name, "Scott."

There is *no* absolute phenomenon there. Something just occurred, like some wind coming . . . Scott is coming . . . All there is, what Scott is, is just some interdependent phenomenon linked with the concepts of superstition: our superstitious, conceptual thought says the word, "Scott." All this is just a bubble; *so* interdependent.

There is this combination, these parts, and then we give a name to them, that's all. You cannot go *further* than that, you cannot say, "Scott is special." But we are looking for more than that, objectively; our ego is not satisfied – especially if we are attracted to Scott and we project a quality of handsomeness onto him.

Our ego tries to project handsomeness onto him almost beyond his capacity. When we go beyond the interdependent, conventional level, then it becomes absolute. But it's a false absolute, isn't it? This is very difficult to comprehend: maybe today we get it, but tomorrow it disappears.

And then from *his* side, his own ego's side, he also doesn't want to accept himself at the conventional, superficial level, as an interdependent phenomenon. His ego also goes beyond the conventional reality of himself. His ego is also holding such a concept of "handsome," which is absolute for him. He puts that label onto parts of himself: sometimes he puts it on his eyes, sometimes on his nose, sometimes his mouth, sometimes his neck – perhaps his navel chakra! He tries, he tries, but *no way*. It's like he's forcing extra things onto himself.

In other words, what I am saying is that he holds such an absolute, *unchangeable*, *unconventional*, *unsuperficial* view. He feels, "This is my reality."

SCOTT IS MERELY LABELED

Scott does not exist in *any* of the elements of his body, *any* of the parts of his mind. It's like a car before it's assembled in the factory: it's just a bunch of things, right? It's not a car then. That combination of parts is not the car. Similar: the combination of Scott's parts is not him.

Now, if we put Scott in front of a mirror, there are two things, right? The reflection of Scott in the mirror and Scott in front of it. So, in our judgment, we think, "Scott is the true one; the one in the mirror is just a reflection, it's not Scott."

But from the point of view of the great yogis Nagarjuna and Lama Tsongkhapa, within both of these atmospheres – the body of Scott and the reflection of Scott – there is no Scott existing. The reflection is not him – and nor is the bubble of his elements. Both equally are not him. It's not, "Ah, the combination of parts is Scott and the reflection is not." Normally we think this. But realistically, if you try to find Scott within these two atmospheres, you cannot. No way.

Scott comes from the name, the label. *That* is why he is existing. Other people's concepts produce the artificial name, the label: then Scott exists. For this reason, all conventional reality is produced by the superstitious mind. For this reason, Scott is not earth, Scott is not water, Scott is not fire, Scott is not consciousness, Scott is not space.

So, between the elements and the name, the superficial view, that is the only existing Scott. You cannot go further; you cannot go beyond the name. When you reach beyond the name you discover the non-existence of Scott. That is not Scott but the totality of Scott, the mahamudra of Scott. But we want to go beyond the name, don't we?

So, the conclusion is: Each of the elements individually is not Scott. And the group of them, the combination, is not Scott. Becoming Scott *depends* on the label, the name, being given to the elements. This connection between the name and the elements is the way that Scott exists. The operation of these is Scott.

When we non-conceptualize in meditation the experience of Scott, our mind reaches beyond the conventions of Scott. If you stay there a long time, contemplating, and then after your session you open up to his atmosphere, his elements, he'll seem like a mirage: is he there or not there? Is he real or not real?

Somehow there is some vibration there, but not absolute. In other words, the absolute Scott disappears. When we are dealing with the normal ego, we always feel that Scott is absolute, which is totally wrong; it's because we have not tasted the non-duality of Scott.

WE REALLY BELIEVE “I’M THERE”

Here we talk about Scott; I use him as an example. But it’s the same for each of us. We feel, “I’m so solid. I am this, I am that.” We believe, “I’m the important one.”

Our concepts hold a dualistic view of our own self. So, our responsibility is to observe this view, the way our concepts grasp at the I as self-existent. Do I exist as I believe, or not? We have to check that out.

We really feel that somewhere within our body or mind, “I’m here.” This is a totally wrong conception! It means that we do not recognize how things operate conventionally, how they exist interdependently. We can’t accept it. We feel that we have some absolute quality.

THE CONVENTIONAL SELF EXISTS ONLY FOR THE RELATIVE MIND

Remember, mahamudra meditation is not trying to destroy the conventional view of I; anyway, this is not the problem. The great yogi, the enlightened one, Tilopa, said to his disciple, Naropa, “My son, you are not bound by the view, but you are kept in bondage by concepts; they have such a tight hold.”

The conventional, relative I operates only for the relative mind. It is not possible for it to become absolute. Coca-cola cannot become absolute. It is a combination of elements gathered together, then we give it a name, then it becomes Coca-cola. It’s the same with ourselves: what we call “I am this, I am that” is only the connection between name and the elements. That’s the only way the I exists.

Because of our superstition, our delusions, we create the fantasy of conventional existence. But the ego mind doesn’t want to accept this; it wants to make it absolute. But it’s not possible.

THE INTUITIVE EGO PROJECTS HALLUCINATIONS ONTO REALITY

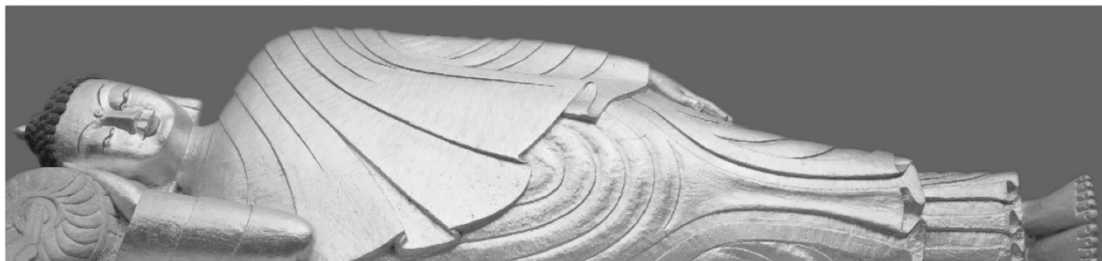
The problem is: as long as you hold the concept that your self exists objectively within the five aggregates, that such a self is existent from its own side, within itself, then you do not touch reality – you go beyond reality, or below it. So the unique skill of this mahamudra meditation technique is that it banishes those concepts.

Seeing things as absolute in this way, holding the concept of an independent I, is not an intellectually-created idea of ego, philosophically made up. We're talking about the intuitive ego, the simultaneously-born ego, the inborn ego, and because it is so instinctive, it is very difficult to catch its projection.

If we don't understand the concepts of ego, how it projects hallucinations onto reality, our mahamudra meditation becomes Mickey Mouse. For this reason, we need a clean-clear state of consciousness gained first from concentrating on the clarity of our mind; then we can go beyond ego by seeing emptiness.

COLOPHON

Excerpted from the teachings of Lama Yeshe's Mahamudra: How to Discover Our Own True Nature, Wisdom Publications 2018.



7. HOW TO LIVE LIFE IN THE CONTEXT OF DEATH

VEN. ROBINA COURTIN

Lama Atisha, in his *Lamp on the Path*, takes from all the extensive teachings of the Buddha on impermanence and gets us to contemplate the grosser level of how things change, in particular our own death. And coming organically and naturally from the previous contemplation, which is to think about the preciousness of this life and the wish not to waste it, his reasoning is to increase our wish not to waste it by realizing that it will end, and could end at any moment.

So let's look at the framework Atisha would recommend that we use to contemplate death, my own death.

1. DEATH IS DEFINITE

The first point is that death is definite. Intellectually, we know it, but emotionally we cling instinctively to a strong sense of being permanent, unchanging. Intellectually it's clear to us; emotionally we're living in denial of it. And remember across the board, what Buddha is saying is, we have within our mind a whole series of misconceptions about how we *think* things are, but in fact we're not in touch with *how* they are.

Everything is impermanent. There's not a single thing in the existence of the universe that is a product of cause and effect that doesn't change. The very nature of cause and effect is that things change. In fact the subtle level of impermanence is the very coming into being of something, inherent in *that* is the passing away of it. You can't have one without the other. You can't have anything that exists that is within the process of cause and effect that doesn't change, that doesn't come and go. Come and go. Come and go.

So okay, death is definite. How you contemplate this, how you think about this. . . When you hear about somebody dying, your first response is, “Oh!” We’re so shocked. “But I just talked to them yesterday!” So that thought is coming from the misconception that somehow instinctively we thought that they were permanently alive, you know. Lama Zopa Rinpoche says, we think, “I am a living person, I’m a living person. And Mary, I talked to her yesterday! She was a living person, how could she have died?” We’re shocked.

When we think of someone who is sick, however, we think “Oh, she’s a dying person”. Look how we talk about dying people, in hushed tones. We look at them sadly, “Oh, how are you?” We talk about Aunt Mary only in relationship to her dyingness, the sickness; she’s no longer a real person, is she? She’s a dying person. You don’t even want to include her in parties. And this is because we have this misconception that somehow this dyingness is something that defines her, whereas livingness defines me. As Lama Zopa says: “Living people die before dying people every day”.

Look at the silly way we talk, an indicator of our misconceptions. “Oh I feel so alive”, we’ll say. Meaning we feel very good. Well excuse me, happy people die. You understand? Healthy people die. Young people die. We might think, “Well, I’m not going to die yet. I’m not old”. And you keep adjusting that, don’t you? I mean, when I was 40, 61 was old. Now, 80 is old. Where is Betty? Betty is old, she is 75. Aren’t you?

Betty I’m 74! Unless you add a year for the Tibetan calendar then I’m 75.

Okay, Betty is old, she’s 74. But she doesn’t think she is old. She probably thinks her grandmother is old or somebody who is 85 is old. So we all just keep adjusting because we don’t like to put ourselves into that category. Dying people are over there, old people are over there, because we have this deep instinct of grasping at permanent me, a living me.

So we’ve got to face reality. “What do you mean: ‘Face reality?’” We think fantasies are nice. Well, Buddha says fantasies have got us

into big trouble. It's a fantasy to think I won't die. Not because he's trying to be cruel and sort of rub our noses in death. But he is saying that given our consciousness is a continuity that didn't begin at the time of conception, and given that it will continue, and given that everything we say, do and think will leave seeds in the mind that will bring future results that will be my experiences – this is the view of karma – then it just makes a lot of sense that death is an extremely important moment in your life. Because it's going to be a transition from this body to another body. It's a bit of a scary transition. We should be used to it, we've done it a million times, the Buddha says. But we're not mentally used to it because we're clinging so powerfully to this one.

And we cling to everything so mightily – Grandma's cup: it's so precious, you've got insurance on it and it's up there and so dear to you and you look at it every day. But its nature is to break, you can't avoid that. But we live in denial of that because we've imposed all of this beauty and marvelousness and value onto it. And so look what happens when it does break. You have a mental breakdown. You live in denial and you start freaking out. You've got to blame, you've got to sue somebody and it's so painful. And then we think we're suffering because the cup broke.

We think we suffer because the person died. It's not true. We suffer – and this is Buddha's point – because we have a fantasy that it won't break, because we have a fantasy that she shouldn't die. In other words, we're not seeing reality. Across the board this is how Buddha is talking. We are not facing reality. We don't see things as they are. We live in denial of things. We are not only not seeing how things are, we're imposing a fantasy onto it.

So this simple meditation here we are trying to do: using Buddha's view of what's real, we're giving it a go, we're thinking about how he says things are and attempting to make that the way we think, in order to argue with ego's entrenched mistaken views. So it's a practical reason.

I mean even when we think of a person who's dying, we think *that's* permanent. A friend of mine and her husband, they split up, and then he was diagnosed with some virulent cancer and was going to be dead in a couple of months, she went back to him to help him die. Well excuse me, he didn't die! She kept waiting! Two months later, three months later, then six months later he's still alive. So she had to leave him again. He was a dying person and he didn't die. And now two years later he's totally alive, he's a living person again.

So death is definite and it's something that is just natural. When we hear that Mary died, it reminds us; surprise is not relevant. That's the way to think about it. "Wow, Buddha is right. Death is definite, there's nothing certain. Wow, look at that". Everything that comes into being necessarily dies. But because of the ego-grasping, this primordial misconception, because of massive attachment, the main voice of the ego, we frantically don't want to disappear. We want to be me. So we can't bear to think that I will change, that I will die. So we have this big fantasy.

Intellectually it would be silly to argue with it: "Oh of course I'm not going to die!" We know we will. But emotionally it's like that. We might as well say we're not going to. That's why we're shocked. Death is definite.

A simple way to bring this into our lives is every time we see or hear about someone dying – a person, an ant, our pets – remember that it's natural: death is definite. And the real way to make it tasty is to think, "That'll be me one day. I will die too".

2. THE TIME OF DEATH IS UNCERTAIN

The second point, getting closer to home now, is the time of death is not certain. So even though we do factor in death to some extent – we have insurance policies and pensions, we organize our funeral, we make our will – still, even if we're old, we haven't scheduled death in, have we? "Well next week is the dentist, and the week after that is death". Or even five years' time. We can plan vacations even in five years, but we don't schedule death. No way, because even though we

do know we will die, that death is definite, we don't like to think that the time of death is uncertain. Why? Because I still feel like a living person. How can I be dying next week? Not possible. I feel alive.

So the time of death is obviously uncertain. We all know we're going to die. But then if I ask each one of us, "Okay, stick it into your schedule. Come on, do a ten-year schedule now, work out your schedule for your life, your plan. Now factor death in please" we'll think it's a joke.

And, of course, we don't know when we will die. That's the point. We vaguely know it'll be some time in the future. It's a logical fact that if I know I will die and I don't know when, then I could die today, couldn't I? But we laugh if we say that. It's an instinctive belief. "Of course I won't die today. Tomorrow? Of course not. Next week? No, come on, don't be ridiculous!" There is a story about a Tibetan astrologer, who had done his own chart, and according to the chart he was going to die today. His own chart. He sat there thinking about it, "Where did I make a mistake?" He was totally convinced he was wrong. And what happened was, while he was trying to work out where he had made the mistake, convinced that he was wrong, the story is that he had this pokey thing and he was playing with it in his ear while he was thinking. And the window shutter blew open and it hit him and he pierced his ear and he died. He died that moment. But the immediate impulse was, "Of course it's a mistake. How can I die today?"

And any one of us if we dared to think that thought and really go into it and make a meditation out of it, to use our creative imagination, it's too scary to us, we don't want to go there, because we can't bear the thought that we could die. And then to do the processing we'd have to do, like the people up on the hundredth floor of the World Trade Center, think of the vivid stories, and the wives and husbands talking to each other, and "I love you, I love you", before they were burned alive in that building. I mean you've really got to speed up the process of giving up attachment and recognizing impermanence when you've only got a few minutes. So what Buddha

is saying is, we can have the luxury while we've got this precious life to contemplate these things. To recognize the reality that the time of death really is uncertain.

Most of us, probably Betty can speculate, being 74, that it's possible that she could probably die sooner than a 20-year-old. But there is no certainty. I read about a footballer who died, a 17-year old. Whatever the reason was, he died. Now, believe me, he didn't expect to die. "No way, I'm young. No way, I'm healthy. No way, I'm happy". Fantasy, fantasy, fantasy.

Lama Zopa says, "Best to think, 'I will die today.'" If you really want to practice, best to think, "I will die today". Because then you won't waste your life. That's the point Atisha wants from us by contemplating these things right here, because it will energize us not to waste this precious life, not to waste this opportunity.

And, you think about it: what's the name of the day you'll die? It's "today", isn't it! So we might as well get used to thinking it!

3. WHAT IS IMPORTANT AT THE TIME OF DEATH?

And that brings us to the third point, the crux of it. At the time of death, at the moment when this consciousness leaves this body, what is important? What is useful to me in that moment? What will be useful to the consciousness that will leave this body and take another body. What will be useful?

That's not the way we think of death. We think of death as the end, and we see a big black hole that we'll sort of go into that no one knows about. We think of death from the point of view of the observer. We should think about death from the point of view of this consciousness moving forward to another body, another house, you've got to go to another house soon. So it's a bit of a difficult transition, and clearly, the more attached you are to this house, the more painful it is to move.

If we never confronted impermanence, our own, and never thought about death, the definiteness of it, the uncertainty of the

time of it, well then that's how death will be, death will be a very scary time.

I remember a friend of mine, Lenny, who worked for years as a hospice worker, she said it's a given that most people die with fear. She said the ones who didn't die with fear were those who had some kind of spiritual path. My feeling is it's not because they're such a high practitioners but because the only people who think about death are spiritual people, Christians, say, because they talk about God or heaven. Materialists, why would we think about death? Because as far as the materialist's view is concerned you disappear when you die, there's nothing left. So there's no reason to think about death. There's no reason to prepare yourself for that event.

If you're a Buddhist you prepare for that event because you're going to move from this body to another one. So it's an important event, it's a very important event that's going to happen in your life: your death. Like moving from your house, you prepare an awful lot for that. Look at the simple things we do that will happen in the future that we have to prepare for. We don't just say, "Oh, when it happens I'll deal with it". That's how we think about death.

We prepare in the most elaborate ways for the smallest things that are going to happen in the future. Especially if you don't know how to do it. Like your driving test. You don't just say, "Oh, when I get to the driving test I'll manage it then". Don't be ridiculous! You've got to train now, you know, it's obvious. It's such a simple point. So if you think of death in this sense, not as some black hole that I will fall into, but as simply a transition. This is the Buddhist approach. From this body to the next. Clearly a very important event to prepare for. And I'm not talking about having your nice coffin, the way people prepare, and the nice plot, out there. We're not discussing that. That's just for your body. By the time your consciousness leaves your body it's just a piece of ka-ka, so don't worry about the body; other people can take care of that. The main point from Buddha's point of view is to prepare internally, to think about your mind.

And how do you prepare for death? It doesn't mean you've got to imagine when you're dying, although that's helpful. You're not preparing for death by thinking about death. You're preparing for death by knowing about impermanence *now*. How do you prepare for your driving test? By driving a car *now*. It's obvious. How do you prepare for death: by facing the reality of it. And you prepare for death by living our lives in a way that prepares us for death.

The conclusion from this is it's a wakeup call. And that's the point that Atisha's stressing here: to prepare ourselves. In other words change the way we think now and therefore change the way we live our lives, because that's how you prepare for death, that's how you prepare for this event. You put all the steps in place. Like you prepare for the wedding, you prepare for the driving test. You do the steps now and so when the day comes it'll just happen in a natural way.

So this third point is, at the time of death what is it useful to me? Well, there's a few givens here: let's look at them.

Given Buddha's assertion that this consciousness of mine didn't begin at conception and goes back and back and back, and that it will not end at death, will continue just into the future – it's indestructible this consciousness of ours; and **given** that whatever I have said, done, and thought in this life, and in infinite previous ones, necessarily leaves a seed in my mind that just doesn't disappear; and given that seeds ripen in the future as one's own experiences: negative actions of body, speech and mind necessarily leave seeds in my mind that will ripen as suffering and positive actions leave a seed in my mind that will ripen as my happiness in the future; and **given** that I don't want suffering and do want happiness – **given** all this, then it follows logically that at the time of death the only thing that is of any use to me is the positive seeds in my mind. That's it.

The body is useless, it can't help. Princess Diana died at 36. I always think of her. This gorgeous aerobiced body, totally in love, everything is perfect, blissful, blah, blah, blah. She died. So at that moment, the only thing that was any benefit to her were the seeds in

her mind from the virtue she had done in her life. All the rest was worse than useless.

The things that I now see as most important in life, Buddha would say – and you analyze it according to his view and it's clear – they are totally essenceless. The things we do take as the purpose of life, you ask most people, it's almost like a mantra: health and family are the main point of our life. Everyone will say that's the point of life. Well, the Buddha would say we are missing the point because at the time of death if they were so crucial they would be a benefit to us, but they are useless. Your family, your husband, your children, your possessions, your nice house, your nice body, your health, your reputation, money in the bank, all the things we spend all our time worrying about and putting into place because we believe in the propaganda that that's the security we are need, that that's what life is all about; we believe in the materialists' propaganda, which we are part of, we buy into it.

But at the time of death all the things you spend your life thinking are important are of no use. They crumble. There's nothing. We all say at the time of death you can't take it with you, but we treat it like a joke. It's very profound when you really get an experience of its truth.

So if this is true, then I had better prepare now by living my life in a reasonable way now: by trying to remove the negative seeds that I have already planted and by trying to develop the positive ones. This is reasonable, based on these assumptions. So at the time of death, when it comes, I must be ready, I have to be prepared. And the way to be prepared is by having thought about it, therefore, when it comes I'm not shocked because I know it's natural that I die. And I'm prepared because I've lived my life by practicing morality, goodness, by not harming others – at the very least, this.

We don't have to be fundamentalist about it and chuck out the husband, and chuck out the kids, and chuck out the reputation, and chuck out our money, no. Just change the way you see them. Change your attitude towards them. That's the real point. Give up attachment

to the house, the family, the body; give up the jealousy, the fear, the neurosis, the blaming. Because those imprints in your mind will be there when you die and you do not want those. But you do want your virtue and your kindness and your generosity and your patience and your non-attachment seeds to ripen.

So you don't wait until death to do it, it's too late then. Start sowing seeds now. That's how you lead your life. By recognizing that it's going to change, that death is definite, the time of death is completely uncertain, you might as well be ready when it does come unexpectedly. It won't give a warning: "You've got ten more breaths left Robina, you'd better get ready". We might have; we'd be lucky. It's actually very fortunate if you get sick before you die, because you've got time to prepare. That's actually really the Buddhist approach. My Buddhist friends on death row have been forced to confront the reality of death, so they can prepare for it. How fortunate.

COLOPHON

*From teachings in the FPMT's Discovering Buddhism Module 3,
Practicing the Path.*

8. WE MUST PREPARE FOR DEATH

LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

OUR GREATEST GIFT TO OTHERS

When suddenly one day one of your loved ones dies and you don't know what to do to help, you'll feel so confused, so lost. Recently a Buddhist student of mine told me that this is what happened for her when her father died unexpectedly. That made me think that knowing how to help others at the time of death is such important education to have.

As you get older, you'll definitely hear about people dying – your family will die, your friends will die (your enemies too!) – so you will need to be prepared to help. This doesn't just apply to people who work with the dying; everyone should learn to know how to help.

Helping our loved ones at the time of death is the best service we can offer them, our greatest gift. Why? Because death is the most important time of life: it's at death that the next rebirth is determined. By providing the right support, the right environment, you can help your loved one die peacefully, with virtuous thoughts, and thus have a good rebirth.

BEFORE YOU HELP OTHERS AT DEATH, YOU NEED TO PREPARE FOR YOUR OWN DEATH

Before you can help someone else you need to learn how to prepare for your own death. If you look at your mind and how much attachment you have, I think you will see that there is a lot of work to be done before you face death, and this is true of almost everybody. Have you freed yourself from attachment to your possessions? To your loved one and friends? To your career and reputation? Could you separate from your body happily tomorrow?

But preparing for a happy death depends not just on practices at the time of death; a happy death depends upon how we live our life

every day, every moment. Practicing patience when someone is angry with us or provokes us or disrespects us, for example, is practical preparation for death. Practicing like this every day protects us from creating negative karma, and that makes death lighter, less fearful. The future depends on the present.

Practicing every day and preparing for the time of your death is far more important than going to the hospital to check the body, because death can happen at any time – even for healthy people. Today, many people have died, healthy as well as unhealthy.

When you know how to die with full confidence that you won't be reborn in the lower realms, that definitely you will have a good rebirth, a good future; that death is just change, that you're leaving this old, sick body for a new, healthy one – then you are qualified to help others who are dying. You will be able to explain things skillfully, according to their minds. You will create the right conditions so that it's easy for their minds to be transformed into virtue at the time of death. You will know how to help them die with a happy mind.

And not only that: once you're familiar with what to do you can tell others what they can do to help you at the time of your own death.

DEATH IS EASY WHEN WE'VE GIVEN UP ATTACHMENT

Death itself is not what causes fear. It is simply the consciousness leaving the body; one labels death on that event. There is no terrifying death from its own side; the terrifying death is made up by our own mind. We have made death terrifying.

What causes the worry and fear, what makes death so difficult is attachment, desire, clinging: to this life, to the body, possessions, family, friends and so forth. This clinging makes death difficult, bringing so much worry and fear. And we cause this ourselves.

ATTACHMENT IS THE MAIN PUSH BEHIND SAMSARA

In relation to taking refuge in the Dharma, the Refuge prayer mentions “the supreme cessation of attachment” when it talks about the cessation of suffering and its causes – it doesn’t say cessation of anger, it doesn’t say cessation of ignorance, it doesn’t say cessation of pride, and so forth (there are many delusions). Why specifically attachment?

Because it’s the main push behind samsara, this cycle of death and rebirth; the main cause.

There is attachment that motivates negative actions, which cause rebirth in the lower realms. Then there is attachment to wanting to be reborn in the human realm, for example, as a result of which we create virtuous karma, which causes that rebirth. And then, as described in the twelve links of dependent arising, at the time of death the eighth and ninth links, craving and grasping – strong attachment, in other words – arise and nourish the seed that was left on the mental continuum by the past karma (the second link) because of the root ignorance (the first), making it ready to produce the next life.

So you can see that even the nearest cause of the next rebirth in samsara is this attachment at the time of death. It is what ties us to samsara continuously, has been tying us to samsara continuously, and will continue to tie us to samara, because our consciousness has existed since beginningless time and will continue to exist forever. Until we have cut the causes of samsara, body after body will keep coming, like the assembly line in a car factory.

COLOPHON

*From Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s How to Face Death Without Fear,
Wisdom Publications.*

9. WHAT HAPPENS AT DEATH?

LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

WHEN DOES DEATH OCCUR?

Death occurs when the consciousness, the mind, separates from the body. Even when the breath has stopped – this is what is called the “outer breath” – or the brain doesn’t function, or the heart doesn’t beat, the person is not dead until the mind, the consciousness, leaves the body. There is still the “inner breath”, and for this to stop and the consciousness to leave the body can take anywhere from a few seconds to three days after the outer breath has ceased (or even longer for experienced meditators).

Dr. Adrian Feldmann, an Australian medical doctor who’s one of the most senior FPMT monks, explained how he saw a person whose heart had stopped, who was clinically dead, but who started to function again.

There are many, many stories like this. These things happen because it’s hard to tell when a person has died if you go by just the heart or the breath or brain activity.

THE COMPONENTS OF A PERSON

In order to better understand the process of death, it’s helpful to understand what makes up a person, the one who dies.

FIVE AGGREGATES

Buddha explained that a person is made up of five “aggregates”: form, feeling, discrimination, compounding aggregates, and consciousness.

Form refers to our body. Feeling and discrimination are two of the mental factors that we experience day to day; all the rest, such as jealousy, patience, and love, etc., are included in compounding aggregates. Consciousness refers to the six consciousnesses: the five

senses and mental consciousness.

FOUR ELEMENTS

Our body is made up of the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind.

GROSS, SUBTLE, AND EXTREMELY SUBTLE BODY AND MIND, OR CONSCIOUSNESS

According to the explanations in highest tantra, there is gross body, subtle body, and extremely subtle, or very subtle, body conjoined respectively with gross consciousness, subtle consciousness, and extremely subtle, or very subtle, consciousness.

The gross body is this one that we can see; the subtle one is made up of channels, winds, and drops; the extremely subtle body is subtle wind.

The sense consciousnesses are gross consciousness. Subtle consciousness includes the various conceptual states of mind called the eighty superstitions, as well as the minds of white appearance, red appearance or increase, and black, or dark, appearance. Finally, there is extremely subtle consciousness, or the mind of clear light.

CHANNELS, WINDS, AND CHAKRAS

The wind energies of the subtle body – more subtle than the air we breathe – carry our mind through a system of 72,000 channels throughout the body. It is said that our consciousness, our mind, “rides” on these winds.

The main channels are the central channel and the right and left channels. They are in the centre of the body, measuring between the two breasts, and a little closer to the back. At various points along these channels there are chakras, the main ones being at the crown, the throat, the heart, the navel and the tip of the sex organ. The two side channels do not run straight down either side of the central channel but wrap around it at the chakras, forming “knots”.

RED AND WHITE DROPS

At the moment of conception in our mother's womb, our consciousness mixed with the red drop, or bodhichitta, from the mother and the white drop from the father. The essence of this conjoined white and red bodhichitta – known as the indestructible drop, with its red and white halves, the size of a tiny bean – abides in the very centre of our heart chakra.

Part of the white bodhichitta also abides at the crown chakra and part of the red at the navel chakra. Our extremely subtle consciousness resides in the indestructible drop.

THE CLEAR LIGHT MIND OF DEATH

While we are alive, the knots at the chakras prevent the winds from entering into and flowing in the central channel. Otherwise these various winds and the states of mind associated with them would all dissolve into the indestructible drop at the heart chakra, at which point our extremely subtle consciousness, the mind of clear light, would manifest and with it we could meditate on emptiness and thus free ourselves from all delusions, eventually becoming enlightened.

Throughout their lives the great meditators train their minds to do this. Lama Yeshe, for example, in his daily tantric practice was able to experience the various visions of the dissolution process that occur naturally at death; in other words, he didn't need to wait until death to experience them. Lama was able to open the chakras, causing the winds to enter into and flow in the central channel and dissolve at the heart chakra, and thus could meditate in the clear light. Therefore, at the time of death the great yogis can remain in meditation in the clear light for as long as they like, which is what happened with Lama. .

DEATH, INTERMEDIATE STATE, AND REBIRTH

The process of death occurs in eight stages, and is experienced by those who have bodies constituted from the sperm of the father and the egg of the mother: human beings and some animals.

During the first four stages we experience the gradual dissolution of twenty-two of twenty-five components: four of the five aggregates, four of the five types of wisdom – the base-time wisdoms, not the result-time – the four elements, five of the six sense bases, and the five inner sense objects.

The breath has stopped by the end of the fourth stage, and by then the gross consciousnesses have ceased.

During the final four stages, the remaining three of the twenty-five components gradually cease: the fifth aggregate, the fifth wisdom, and the sixth sense base.

During the fifth, sixth, and seventh stages subtle consciousness gradually dissolves: the eighty superstitions, bringing, in order, the white, red, and dark appearances.

By the eighth stage, all that is left is the extremely subtle wind conjoined with the extremely subtle consciousness, the mind of clear light, at the indestructible drop at the heart. Death occurs when the indestructible drop splits open and the conjoined extremely subtle wind and mind leaves the body.

However, for ordinary people the mind can stay in the body for up to three days after the breath stops, although they are not aware. The great yogis, as I mentioned, can meditate in the clear light for as long as they like.

As soon as the mind leaves the body we take a “life” between this life and the next called the intermediate state, and up to forty-nine days later will take a new rebirth.

COLOPHON

*From Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s How to Face Death without Fear,
Wisdom Publications.*

10. THE TWELVE LINKS OF DEPENDENT ARISING AT THE TIME OF DEATH

LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

Cyclic existence operates through the twelve links of dependent arising. From **(1) the ignorance** that believes in inherent existence we create **(2) compounded action**, or **karma**, the imprints of which are left on our **(3) consciousness**. (Some authors of the scriptures also count the result consciousness that enters the fertilized egg.) Next is **(4) name and form**, “name” referring to the four mental aggregates and “form” to the physical, the egg and sperm, when the five come together in the womb.

When they begin to develop as the fetus they are known as **(5) the six sense bases**. Then comes **(6) contact**, when the mind connects with external objects through the sense bases of the eyes, ears, and so forth, followed by **(7) feeling** in relation to those objects, either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, which gives rise to **(8) craving** and **(9) grasping**, then **(10) becoming**. Next is **(11) birth**, and finally there is **(12) old age and death**.

THE TWELVE LINKS OF THIS PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH

Let us discuss the twelve links in relation to this human body that we have now. What caused our consciousness to join the egg and sperm in our mother’s body? What made it go there?

In past lives, because of **ignorance** we created both non-virtuous and virtuous karma, which planted seeds, left potentials, in the field of our **consciousness**. At the time of death of our life before this one, whether we were a human or an elephant or a kangaroo, **craving** arose – craving to not separate from that body. Then fear arose, because of the attachment to not wanting to leave the body:

that's what causes fear at the time of death. After that, **grasping** arose, a stronger form of attachment, this time – in our case – attachment to receiving a human body.

Now, in the case of someone who is going to be reborn in the hot hells the craving is the same – not wanting to separate from their body – but the grasping is to heat because they feel very cold. Many times dying people say they feel cold and beg for blankets, but even if you give them two or three it won't be enough: their grasping at heat is so strong. (This could also happen because the fire element is dissolving at that point.) The grasping at heat activates a negative karmic seed, the second link, which causes their mind to migrate to a hell being's body right after death. The grasping is the very close condition; there were, of course, the previously-created causes: the first link, ignorance, and the second, karma.

GRASPING AT A HUMAN REBIRTH AT THE TIME OF DEATH IS A CAUSE FOR ACHIEVING ONE

In our case, as humans, the very close condition at the time of our past death, just before the gross consciousness ceased, was the grasping at, the wish to receive, a human body. In other words, in order to receive this perfect human rebirth that we have now, we must have had not only the karma of perfect morality and great generosity but also the strong desire – grasping, the ninth link – to have a human body.

When we understand that attachment to this life is never virtuous but attachment at the time of death to either a human life or rebirth in a pure land is virtuous, then we can understand the function of this link of grasping.

In other words, whereas craving and grasping are certainly operating in our daily life in the form of attachment, in the context of the twelve links they are more to do with the connection of one life to the next.

The karmic seed that gives rise to the new rebirth is there on our mind, the second link, but it is grasping at the time of death that activates its ripening.

FIVE CAUSES FROM PAST LIVES, SEVEN RESULTS IN THIS LIFE

To summarize: five of the links are causes from past lives: three delusions – the three links of **ignorance**, **craving**, and **grasping**; and two karmas – the two links of **compounded action** and **becoming**.

First there was the delusion **ignorance**, the first link, then the delusions arising at the time of death, the eighth link, **craving**, and ninth, **grasping**. Then there were the two karmas – the second link, in our case a virtuous **karma** (which could have been created thousands, even millions, of lives ago), and the second karma, **becoming**, the tenth link: the previously created karmic seed made ready by craving and grasping at death: that is what is called becoming.

It is these five that formed these aggregates, this body and mind, this samsara.

Of the seven results that manifest in this life, the eleventh link, **birth**, started at the moment our consciousness joined the fertilized egg. **Old age**, the beginning of the twelfth, **old age and death**, started the next moment in the womb – “old age” is not just what is known in the world: the wrinkles, the white hair, and so forth.

Now, all there is left is **death**.

COLOPHON

*From Lama Zopa Rinpoche's How to Face Death without Fear,
Wisdom Publications.*

11. THE EIGHT STAGES OF DEATH

LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

Even though we all go through the eight stages at the time of death, what I describe here is a gradual death. Those who die violently or suddenly go through the stages very quickly. And sometimes in a violent death the mind could leave the body immediately and go straight to the intermediate state.

As I mentioned, the great meditators, those who have deeply familiarized themselves with these stages in meditation during their lives, can recognize the stages of death as they occur and can meditate on emptiness throughout. But ordinary people don't recognize them. (We go through these stages every time we sleep too, but we don't recognize them then, either.) It's like when you're looking at a person, let's say, but your mind is concentrating on another object, a sound for example, or you're thinking of something else, and even though the person is in front of you, you simply don't see them.

It's the same at death. We don't recognize the visions that occur at each stage of this evolution – first this, then that, then that; now the clear light, now the intermediate state, etc. – because of the pollution of our ignorance and our uncontrolled mind. Even though we might know these stages intellectually, not having trained our minds in the meditation techniques during our lifetime and not having created enough virtuous karma or purified our minds, we can't recognize these experiences as they occur. But it's possible.

It's good to help your loved one meditate on these stages during the months and weeks before death. They can also become familiar with these stages as they go to sleep.

And if they have a highest tantra practice you can guide them through the stages of meditation, which I discuss in chapter 10, when you help them with their daily practices.

GROSS CONSCIOUSNESS

(1) THE VISION OF A MIRAGE

As the aggregate of form dissolves your body becomes thinner and your limbs become loose and unmanageable.

As the mirror-like wisdom dissolves – these and the other four wisdoms are labeled according to the function of the senses – your ability to see many objects at the same time, as a mirror reflects many objects together, ceases; and you cannot see the forms of people and objects clearly.

As the earth element dissolves you feel as if you are sinking; you might even reach up as if to hold on to something.

As the eye sense base dissolves you can no longer open or close your eyes. If your eyes are open they will remain like that without blinking: this is a sign that you will die within one or two hours. In fact, this is the nearest sign of death.

This is what happened with Lama Yeshe during the last couple of hours before he passed away: he was unable to close his eyes. And I've seen it in other dying people.

As the inner subtle form dissolves your body loses its strength completely, and it loses its radiance.

You will have a vision of a mirage, an inner vision, like water shimmering in the heat. Your vision blurs; everything seems watery and wavy, like a mirage in the distance.

(2) THE VISION OF SMOKE

As the aggregate of feeling dissolves you can no longer experience the three kinds of feelings: pleasure, pain, and indifference; you're indifferent to suffering and happiness.

The wisdom of equanimity, which sees these three together, as having the same nature, dissolves.

As the water element dissolves the liquids of your body dry up; your mouth feels very dry: this too is a sign that death could be within one or two hours.

As the ear sense base dissolves you can no longer distinguish sounds.

As the inner sound dissolves you can no longer even hear the buzzing in your ears.

You will have a vision of smoke, like a room filled with incense, or smoke from burning green wood swirling about.

YOUR DYING THOUGHTS ACTIVATE THE KARMIC SEED THAT DETERMINES YOUR NEXT REBIRTH

As Pabongka Rinpoche says in *Liberation In the Palm of Your Hand*, your dying thoughts activate the karma that will be the cause of your next rebirth, and the activators of this “throwing karma” are the eighth and ninth links, craving and grasping, as discussed in the twelve links of dependent arising in chapter 4. Rinpoche says that this takes place while the mind is still active and you can still recall virtue or be reminded of it by other people, which is now.

At this point it is so important to be able to control the arising of the disturbing thoughts by remembering the guru, the teachings – renunciation of samsara, karma, emptiness, loving kindness and great compassion, and the rest – which gives us the chance to be born in a buddha’s pure land or to take a perfect human rebirth.

If our last gross thoughts are virtuous the throwing karma will be virtuous; if the last gross thoughts are non-virtuous the throwing karma will be non-virtuous. The karmic seed that ripens is whichever is heavier, the stronger habit – which, as I mentioned, could have been planted hundreds, even millions, of lifetimes ago; if they’re equal, the seed that was planted first will be the one that ripens.

If we die with anger, say, or strong attachment to our life, our loved ones, etc., our birth will be only in the lower realms, nowhere else. Generally, attachment causes rebirth as a hungry ghost; ignorance causes rebirth as an animal, and anger as a hell being. In these lower realms we will experience unimaginable sufferings for an incredible length of time. The suffering in the human realm is

nothing in comparison – in fact, it's like great pleasure in comparison.

At this point, when dying with non-virtuous thoughts five things can occur, although not necessarily all five. They include soiling ourselves, our arms and legs thrashing about, screaming, blood coming from the ears, nose and mouth, and our eyes rolling up. If we have created very heavy negative karma, all five will happen and as we are dying we will have terrible visions of our future life. We will feel that we are moving from light into darkness.

On the other hand, dying with a virtuous state of mind causes us to have a peaceful and happy death. In fact, if we're like the best spiritual practitioners we will be joyful at the time of death and will have a sense of passing from darkness into light.

(3) THE VISION OF FIRE SPARKS

As the aggregate of discrimination dissolves you can no longer recognize your friends and relatives.

As the wisdom of discriminating awareness, or discernment, dissolves you cannot remember anyone's names; the people around you become blurs.

As the fire element dissolves the body's heat gradually ceases; the capacity to digest food ceases.

As the nose sense base dissolves, breathing in becomes difficult and weaker and breathing out becomes stronger and longer.

As the inner sense of smell dissolves you can no longer smell anything.

You will have a vision of fire sparks, like the sparks that come when you burn dry grass, or like starlight, or a sky filled with fireflies.

HOW THE HEAT LEAVES THE BODY

You can judge the type of rebirth you will take by where the heat in your body begins to cease. If you are dying with a positive attitude, which causes a happy rebirth, your feet will get cold first and the heat will eventually only be at the heart.

If you are dying with fear or anger or attachment, for example, which causes a suffering rebirth, the head will get cold first and, again, the heat will eventually only be at the heart.

(4) THE VISION OF A FLAME

As your aggregate of compounding aggregates dissolves you can no longer move your body, and your awareness of worldly activities and worldly success and their necessity cease.

As your all-accomplishing, or completion, wisdom dissolves, even if you could hear a name you cannot remember its meaning. In our daily life we normally remember the meaning of something and then decide to do it; now you can't think of the meaning of anything.

As your wind element dissolves your breathing stops.

As your tongue sense base dissolves your tongue becomes short and thick and turns blue at the root: this, too, is a sign of imminent death.

As your body sense base dissolves you can no longer experience soft or rough sensations.

As your inner taste dissolves you can no longer taste anything.

You will see a vision of a flame – actually, according to Song Rinpoche, it is more like the light around the flame, a dim red-blue light.

THE OUTER BREATH HAS NOW STOPPED

During the final four stages of death, the last three of the twenty-five components gradually dissolve – the aggregate of consciousness, the wisdom of the sphere of phenomena, and the mental sense base.

SUBTLE CONSCIOUSNESS

During the next three stages, the eighty superstitions – the various delusions; the dualistic, wrong conceptions – gradually dissolve.

(5) THE WHITE VISION

The first thirty-three of the eighty superstitions cease.

The winds in the right and left channels move up and open the head chakra, loosening the knots there, and enter the central channel.

This causes the white bodhichitta at the crown to melt and flow down the central channel to the heart, touching the central channel as it goes.

Now you experience the white vision, the mind of white appearance, like very bright moonlight in autumn, or like the almost-white sky caused by the light of the rising moon when everything is covered with snow.

Whereas the previous inner visions had some movement to them, this and the following ones are perfectly still.

(6) THE RED VISION

The next forty of the eighty superstitions dissolve.

The winds in the right and left channels move down and open the sex and navel chakras, loosening the knots there, and enter the central channel.

This causes the red bodhichitta at the navel to shoot up the central channel to the heart chakra, touching the central channel as it goes.

Now you experience the red vision, the mind of red increase. It's like the clear red sky, just before the dawn breaks; or like a copper-red reflection in the sky, and it's perfectly still.

(7) THE DARK VISION

The final seven of the eighty superstitions dissolve.

The red and white bodhichitta meet at the heart chakra, in the indestructible drop in the central channel, with its red and white halves.

Now you experience the dark vision, the mind of dark appearance; it's as if you're falling into darkness. Or it's like a dark and empty sky or being in a dark room. At the beginning of this vision you have some awareness and recognize an appearance of darkness, but then you become unconscious.

EXTREMELY SUBTLE CONSCIOUSNESS

(8) THE CLEAR LIGHT VISION

Now the clear light vision appears. This is the subtlest level of mind, occurring only after all the grosser consciousnesses have ceased. It's like an autumn dawn, when the sky is so clear, no clouds, no dust. It is not bright like at noon, not red, and not dark. Nothing else appears.

The yogis continue to meditate at this point and can stay as long as they like. For ordinary people, who have no awareness of what is happening, it could be three days before the mind leaves the body.

HOW THE MIND LEAVES THE BODY AT THE TIME OF DEATH

Death occurs when the indestructible drop splits open and the extremely subtle mind and wind leave your heart chakra in the central channel and, depending on which rebirth you will take, exit the gross body at one point or another.

If you will be reborn in a pure land of a buddha (or the formless realm), your mind leaves from the crown; if you will be reborn as a human being, your mind leaves from the eyes; as a hell being, from the anus; as an animal, from the sex organ; as a hungry ghost, from the mouth.

The consciousness can also leave from the navel, ears, nose, and, I think, from midway between the eyebrows – perhaps this would be the case for someone who will be reborn in the form realm.

SIGNS OF DEATH

When the mind leaves the body of a man, the white bodhichitta continues down the central channel and leaves through the sex organ and the red continues up and leaves through the nostrils; in a woman the white bodhichitta goes up and leaves through the nostrils and the red bodhichitta goes down and leaves through the organ.

This is the final sign that the mind has left the body, the actual death.

THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

The moment the indestructible drop splits open, your extremely subtle consciousness leaves from the heart chakra and becomes the intermediate state being's mind, even before it leaves the gross body. The extremely subtle wind that is the vehicle of the extremely subtle consciousness becomes the condition for the intermediate state being's mind and the very subtle consciousness becomes the condition for the intermediate stage being's body.

You can see the world you just left, your relatives, and your dead body, but the karma is finished so you do not recognize any of it and have no desire to go back.

You then go through the eight stages in reverse order: the dark vision, the red vision, the white vision, the eighty superstitions, etc., then take the body of the intermediate state being. This body, which is subtle and has no resistance to matter, is similar in appearance to the body of the next life.

The longest time spent in the intermediate state is forty-nine days, but if after seven days rebirth hasn't happened yet you will experience what is called a small death, again taking a body in the intermediate state for a further seven days until another small death occurs or a new rebirth is found.

If your mind is not clouded by delusions the intermediate state is a wonderful experience. It is even possible to attain enlightenment in the intermediate state, like Lama Tsongkhapa did.

For a mind clouded by negativity the intermediate state is terrible. There is much fear as you experience karmically-created visions such as feeling pressed down by the earth, stuck in big cracks, being taken by a sea wave, or being in a whirlpool or in a great fire. You suffer because of not recognizing these as visions, the projections of your deluded mind. If you could recognize this there would be less fear. You believe them to be true so there is extreme suffering.

However, even if you have created much negative karma and are destined for the lower realms, there are special practices that can be done by lamas that can influence you in the intermediate state and

cause you to take a favorable rebirth such as in a pure land of the buddhas: phowa and jangwa. Of course, success very much depends on your connection with the lama doing the practice, on their skill, and on the heaviness of your obscurations.

REBIRTH AS A HUMAN

As I mentioned, the experience of being reborn is similar to the experience of waking up – but whether we wake up to a pleasant day or a violent storm is another matter! If we are reborn in the lower realms the awakening will be a terrible one.

If from the intermediate state you will take rebirth as a human you will see your future parents in sexual union. If you are to be born as a male you will be attracted to the mother and will have aversion for the father, and if as a female you will be attracted to the father and have aversion for the mother.

Because of the habit, the karmic imprint, of attachment to sexual union, the intermediate state being will want to embrace, have sexual intercourse with, the one it's attracted to. But as it approaches it doesn't see the body of the parent, only the sexual organs, which causes anger to arise. This anger becomes the condition for the intermediate state being to die and its mind to enter the mother's womb.

It is easy to see how ordinary birth is caused by delusions and karma.

COLOPHON

*From Lama Zopa Rinpoche's How to Face Death without Fear,
Wisdom Publications.*

12. HELPING OTHERS AT THE TIME OF DEATH IS A BIG RESPONSIBILITY

LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

As we've discussed, a good rebirth – a perfect human rebirth or birth in a buddha's pure land such as Amitabha's Blissful Realm, where there's no suffering and where we can achieve enlightenment quickly – depends upon dying peacefully, with virtuous thoughts. If we die with anger or strong attachment or fear our birth will be only in the lower realms.

Therefore, the people surrounding the person who is dying – friends, family, professional carers – have a big responsibility. I will put it this way: Whatever arises in your loved one's mind, whether their thoughts are virtuous or nonvirtuous, very much depends upon you and other helpers, how you behave towards them. It is a great responsibility. If you are not careful, if you do not have this education – that the way you behave affects the mind of the person and therefore their future life – you will only harm them, not help them.

Chöden Rinpoche says that even if you cannot help the person become virtuous, at least help them become neutral – not nonvirtuous, not virtuous. Best, of course, is to help them become virtuous.

HELPERS SHOULD BE CLOSE TO THE DYING PERSON

Rinpoche says that the people who help, who give advice and support, and especially the one who speaks the name of the person's guru in their ear when their breath stops, shouldn't be someone they dislike; in fact, there should be pure samaya between them, a pure spiritual relationship.

Also, in order to ensure that attachment doesn't arise in your loved one's mind – especially when the time of death is close –

Rinpoche advises that it's best not to allow anyone for whom they have strong attachment to be in their presence; ideally, you shouldn't even mention their name. Of course, if that person can help your loved one, help them solve their problems or alleviate their fears, then that's okay.

But if their presence simply increases their attachment, their fears of separation, then it's very harmful, making it difficult for your loved one to let go.

A PRAYER FOR HELPERS

May whoever

Sees me,

Touches me,

Remembers me,

Thinks about me,

Talks about me,

Praises me,

Even criticizes me –

May they immediately be free from all spirit harms

And negative karma,

And may they complete the path,

And achieve full enlightenment as soon as possible.

In this way you become wish-fulfilling for your loved ones – for all sentient beings. As soon as they see you, hear your voice, touch you, or even remember you, they will immediately be free of the fear of death and their mind will be filled with great joy. Then they will be able to go to a pure land, where they can get enlightened.

USE YOUR WISDOM

And remember, as I mentioned at the beginning, your ability to help your loved one depends on what you have practiced throughout your life. The more you understand what you are supposed to do for your own death, the more you will know how to help your loved one. The

less you know, the less wisdom you will have. When you know how to die with a peaceful mind, then you can confidently help your loved one. You will be able to create the right conditions so that it's easy for their minds to be transformed into virtue.

You need to be skillful in advising your loved one according to their state of mind, their background, their life; whether they are a non-believer or have a religion, and if they have a religion what their level of understanding is.

We're not clairvoyant, so we won't know exactly what fits the mind of the person or when the right time is to explain it to them, or even whether they have the karma to listen to the advice or to understand it. Check, analyze how to present the advice: the right time, the right mood, and then educate them however you can, with as much compassion as possible and as much wisdom, with skillful means.

MERELY HEARING SOME OF THE PRACTICES CAN HELP

But remember, as I mentioned and as Rinpoche has advised, even if the dying person doesn't have faith in Buddha's teachings it's still good for them to hear the practices; that receiving the benefits of reciting or hearing them doesn't require devotion.

CREATE A CONDUCTIVE ENVIRONMENT

MAKE THE PLACE BEAUTIFUL

You should make the room as beautiful as possible: a calm, peaceful, serene, holy environment is so important. There should be beautiful views, beautiful art, flowers – flowers give a very special spiritual feeling.

The point is to help put positive imprints on your loved one's mind. If their mind is elevated they will not be afraid of dying.

DISPLAY HOLY OBJECTS SUCH AS STATUES, IMAGES, STUPAS, TEXTS, PRAYER WHEELS

Display images of the buddhas and your loved one's gurus. If they're

not Buddhist you could have images from their own religion, such as Mary or Jesus or Shiva. Also display stupas, prayers wheels, texts, etc., ready to use for blessings. Put things around nicely.

THE POSITION OF THE BED

If possible, your loved one should be lying with their head pointing towards the north, which means they are facing the west, which is where Amitabha Buddha's pure land is.

This prepares them for the practice of going to sleep in the lion posture, which in turn prepares them for dying in this position, which is how Buddha himself passed away. Lying like this reminds them of the Buddha, that they're following in his footsteps.

NO TOBACCO

Do not allow anyone to smoke anywhere near the dying person. Besides causing physical problems, without question smoking is harmful spiritually. It pollutes the subtle nervous system, the channels, etc.

According to the great lama, Panchen Lama Chökyi Gyaltsen – who composed the incredible teaching, *Guru Puja*, as well as many other teachings, including a text on mahamudra – when someone asked him to perform *phowa* at the time of death the first thing he would ask is whether the person smoked, and if they did he wouldn't do the practice. It seems that smoking makes it difficult to transfer the consciousness to a pure land.

NO PETS, ANIMAL SKINS

You should not allow any cats and dogs in the room with your loved one, especially cats – it's said that their hair is polluted. Here in Tibetan Ceremonies of the Dead the author says that if the person who is dying is lying on an animal skin you should remove it before they die; the same if they're wearing an animal skin or are covered by one. It says that being around animal skins at the time of death makes transference of consciousness to a pure land more difficult,

even if it's a lama who is performing phowa. I haven't heard this said in other teachings, but it says it here. Also, it is said that the skins make the body smelly.

A CALM AND PEACEFUL ENVIRONMENT

You must not create a situation that disturbs your loved one's mind, makes them angry or upset. Don't have anyone emotional in the room, especially when death is close. It is best that people don't cry within hearing distance of your loved one as this creates clinging in their mind.

And you should not hold on to them. Crying and pleading with them not to die won't keep them alive and will only agitate them and make their death more difficult.

In other words, you should create an environment that is calm and peaceful. This cannot be stressed enough.

COLOPHON

*From Lama Zopa Rinpoche's How to Face Death without Fear,
Wisdom Publications.*

13. LIVE A GOOD LIFE AND PREPARE FOR DEATH BY ABIDING BY THE LAWS OF KARMA

VEN. ROBINA COURTIN

KARMA: FUNDAMENTAL TO BUDDHISM

If we're saying we're a Buddhist and we're attempting to practice Buddhism, if we're not applying the laws of karma, if we're not taking that as our hypothesis, if we're not applying that in our daily life, we're not really being a Buddhist. This is fundamental to Buddhist teachings – his view about the world, how it comes into being, what our mind is, what causes happiness, what causes suffering, etc..

So, this law applies – runs – in the mind. So the mind, for the Buddha, is where things happen. The mind is where the workshop is. The mind is where everything happens. The mind is where the source of suffering is. The mind is where the source of happiness is. The mind is the point.

WHERE DO I COME FROM?

According to Buddha we're not created by anyone, either a superior being or our parents. Instead, we're the product of our own past. In a simple sense, you could say you come from previous moments of yourself. Think of your mind as a river of mental moments – your thoughts and feelings of *now*, in the simplest linear sense of cause and effect, your thoughts and feelings of *now* come from the previous moment of your thoughts and feelings. And your thoughts and feelings of the previous moment come from – guess what? – the previous moment of your thoughts and feelings. You track it back to ten years ago, twenty years ago, in your mothers' womb. "Well, maybe I began a month before conception". Well, no. If my mind existed then, it must have come from a previous moment of my mind. Then clearly you get back to the first moment of conception, when we

all assume we began. If you're Christian, God put a soul there, in the egg and sperm; and if you're a materialist, you are only the egg and sperm.

Well, the Buddha has this third option. The first second of conception in our mother's womb is the entry of our own consciousness into the egg and sperm. So you can track your consciousness right in this continuity of mental moments going right back to that first moment of conception. "Well, I must have begun then". Well, yes, relatively speaking, this package called "Robina" began then, but where did the body come from? Mummy and Daddy. Where did your mind come from? Previous moment of itself. So your mind is its own continuity of mental moments.

It's a very simple concept, actually. Not difficult for us to intellectualize, to theorize about. Your mind is its own continuity. And obviously, to assume this, you have to assume it's not physical. Because, clearly, if you think your mind is your brain, then you did come from your parents, which is the materialist view, that they "made" you, you know?

YOUR MIND IS YOURS

And so the experiential implication of this is that your mind is *yours*. And that means the contents of it are yours. And so what are the contents of your mind? All the love and the kindness and compassion and wisdom and contentment and anger and jealousy and fear and paranoia and rage – all of this. This is the contents of your mind. So all of these, being contents of your mind, they too come from previous moments of that particular quality in your mind.

So this is a simple idea that implies reincarnation, isn't it? It's a simple concept. Not a difficult concept intellectually. But we're so familiar with the view that I come from mother and father and my anger comes from mother and father and my jealousy and my depression and my all the rest come from the DNA and the egg and the sperm and all the rest, you know. They play a role, no argument. But they're not the main thing. For the Buddha, the main things are

your mind, your thoughts, your feelings, your emotions, your unconscious. Your tendencies, your feelings. All of this. This is yours. This is *yours*.

We come into this life fully programmed with all of our tendencies, with all of our characteristics. It's a big surprise to us. I mean, we accept we come fully programmed, but we think the programming comes from mother and father. It doesn't, Buddha says. Tendencies in the mind are mental and mind is not physical and it comes from previous moments of itself, not from the external condition, which is called the brain.

One can see indicators in the brain of certain things, no argument with this. So this fundamental point of Buddhism is that your mind is yours. And whatever's in it is simply from you having put it there in the past. Hardly surprising concept – cause and effect.

KARMA MEANS INTENTION

This is the essential idea of karma. Karma is a Sanskrit word, that is translated as “action”, really simply. Which implies reaction. Action-reaction, in this meaning: cause and effect. Seed-fruit, you know.

It's also, more fundamentally, translated as intention, will, volition. Every microsecond of everything we say, everything we think and feel, and indeed do and say, with our body and speech on the basis of what's in the mind, is a karma. An intentional action that necessarily will leave an imprint, or a tendency or a seed in your consciousness and will ripen in the future in that consciousness as your experiences.

What goes on in our mind, in other words, is the main cause of our future experiences. This is what Buddha says.

This is a simple concept. Not a difficult idea. It's just a question of being able to say it and get our heads around it. It isn't complicated. We think it's complicated, but it's just because we haven't got the right words, you know. It's not a complicated concept at all.

Of course, it's not evident to us. So we take it as our working hypothesis. Buddha's saying basically: we are the creators of

ourselves. It's a very simple point. Whatever's in your mind is there because you put it there, not because Mummy and Daddy did something to you. This flies in the face of the assumption that we all have that's the basis of our lives, and is, as Buddha would say, a misconception. That, you know, I am angry because my father was angry. I am jealous because my mother was jealous. I am depressed because I have certain hormones. We always put an external reason to it, you know. Which sort of, for us, is a way of saying, "It's not my fault".

We've got this dualistic view. We assume we're made by mother and father. We assume the anger and the jealousy and the depression are either there because of the genes or the DNA or they're there because I've got a mean boyfriend, or because I had a lousy mother or a horrible husband or a bad kid or a horrible boss. This is the typical way we talk. And this is, in fact, the view of the materialist world. This is the philosophy of the materialist world that is backed up by the view that your mother and father made you, that you're only physical.

ACCOUNTABILITY

One has to know one's mind, because that's what we need to change. Yes, certain people's external conditions make it quite tough – if you're in a prison and you can't open that door; you can say "Well, I can't help being angry, I'm surrounded by mean people". You might say that. But the ones who are really practicing don't say that. They know that this is their physical condition, and this is indeed the result of their karma (and we'll talk more about that in a minute), and so they will adapt themselves to that condition and still work on their minds.

The person who's got the chemicals that aren't working, that seem to be the trigger for depression, yes, you recognize that you've got those particular chemicals, but the depression is your mind, it's your viewpoint.

You might be around people who are mean and ugly who hit you all the time, and if you've got an angry tendency it'll make it easy for you to get angry, it's true. But if you're really being accountable, you'll recognize the anger's yours.

This is what we have to do. This is the toughest part. This is the part that's massive for us. So difficult because we're so used to this dualistic way of talking. It's always like, "It's not my fault. It's not my fault".

And that's the view of the materialist world, you look. It's an assumption of ego. "I didn't ask to get born, did I? It's not my fault. My mother made me. My father made me". So, the whole way ego works, Buddha says, is in its nature dualistic. It's always, "Poor me, the victim". Lama Yeshe would call ego the "self-pity me". We're always trying to defend ourselves, "It's not fair", "It's not my fault", "It's his fault", "I didn't mean to". Everything to try to deny accountability. It's so painful for us to be accountable. This is how ego is, this is its nature. This is the way it is.

By listening to and thinking about the Buddha's views of karma – that your consciousness, your tendencies, your experiences, come from our own past actions, not your parents; my mind is mine, I came fully programmed into this life.

And, of course, this includes our good tendencies and experiences as well, but we forget about those. We agonize, "Why do bad things happen to me?" We never agonize, "Why do good things happen to me?" We don't care why, just give me more! But we have all the good things for the same reason: I created the cause to have them.

FOUR WAYS THAT KARMA RIPENS

There are four ways in which our actions from the past lives – you know, before we even entered into this present womb of our mother – there are four ways those past actions ripen in the present. Or indeed, there are four ways in which our present actions leave seeds in the mind that will ripen in the future as one's experiences. It's a constant process, ongoing. Every microsecond of everything that goes

on in our mind, and the things we do on the basis of those thoughts with our body and speech, this is the karmic process. This is constantly occurring. This is the natural process of cause and effect, constantly in play.

1. FULLY RIPENED RESULT: A REBIRTH

The first, main one – they call it Fully Ripened Result – is the type of rebirth we get born into. So, you know, if we're materialists, or if we're Christians, for example, we both agree on one thing at least – that someone else made us. I was made by God. I was made by Mummy and Daddy. They're the same principle, aren't they? That you're made by someone else. Which means it's got nothing to do with you.

Whereas the Buddha says, "Everything to do with me". Our past actions are the main cause of why my mind found its way to my present mother's human womb. Why blame your parents? They're just lying there having fun and you come along. So Buddha puts us right in the centre of responsibility of even why we're human in the first place. Which is kind of an interesting concept – who would have thought that you were the main cause of who you are? Big surprise!

Not more than a few weeks before conception in your mother's womb, your consciousness was in another form, another life. And at the time of that death, before you stopped breathed, very simply speaking, a very strong seed from having practiced morality – in the context of keeping vows of morality according to Lama Zopa Rinpoche – was activated that basically programmed your mind after it left that body to find its way to your present mother's human womb.

Your father and mother having sex is just a co-operative cause. They did not make you, they did not create you. Your consciousness had very strong karmic connection with them from past history with those particular parents.

One lama said that at the time of a male and female human having sex, billions of consciousnesses that are recently passed away (and

that's obviously not just from the human realm; Buddha would assert a whole spectrum of possibilities of types of consciousnesses existing in different realms) are all hovering around trying to get in. Well, we got in! From Buddha's point of view, we should be weeping in delight every day at how fortunate we are, getting such an extraordinarily fortunate life.

Clearly it's easier to get a mosquito birth, dog birth, a fish birth: we can see there are billions and trillions of other sentient beings, we can see this. But we got the human one. Amazing.

That's the first way our karma ripened – the type of rebirth we born into.

But, you know, Mother Teresa and Hitler both got one of those, so what causes the differences?

2. ACTIONS SIMILAR TO THE CAUSE: OUR TENDENCIES

That gets us to the second way in which our past actions ripened in the present. And this is our tendencies, our characteristics, our personality; our depression, our kindness, our wish to kill, our wish to lie, our being good at piano, our being good at math; whatever it might be.

And that's an interesting point, psychologically speaking. In Buddhist terms, we give equal status to whether you're good at love, good at anger or good at music. It's just a tendency.

But we see our artistic tendencies and our emotional ones in a very different light in our contemporary world, don't we?

For example, we're honoured to own responsibility for our being good at music.

“Why are you good at piano, Robina?”

“Well, I have musical tendencies and I practiced really hard: *that's* why I'm good at it”.

“Why are you good at anger, Robina?”

“Oh, that's my father's fault! Nothing to do with me!” No accountability whatsoever! We love being accountable for our being good at music, or maths, or being a gymnast, you know, but not

emotional stuff. We have this different set of laws when it comes to emotional stuff, which I find most fascinating – no logic at all.

The Buddha says, those tendencies – whether you're angry, jealous or just being good at music – are just tendencies. Why do we have a tendency? From having done it before. Quite simple. Mozart clearly had musical tendencies. Hitler clearly had other tendencies, and he expressed them, didn't he, in his actions.

Our mothers and fathers – this is a big shock to us – they're not the main cause of this. The absolute default explanation in the materialist world is it's all in the DNA and the genes, etc. That's why we always look into the past, to our parents, for the causes of why I am what I am.

Yes, Buddha agrees: look into the past, but not to your parents; look into your past lives.

Alternatively we see it all as conditioning. My mother was a musician, and everyone would say, "Yeah, Robina's good at music because her mother was good at music". Buddha would say, "No – Robina's good at music because she practiced it before. My mother had also practiced it before, and then she encouraged my music by teaching me. A simple point, but shocking to us.

So, your tendencies – they call this Actions Similar to the Cause. They're yours. You're fully programmed with every one of these from the first second of conception. Millions of these different imprints. Millions of these different tendencies. They're your own past habits.

3. EXPERIENCES SIMILAR TO THE CAUSE: HOW PEOPLE TREAT US, ETC.

The third way that your karma ripens is called Experiences Similar to the Cause, and that's all the stuff that happens to you. The people and creatures you meet, the parents you get, the teachers, the abusers, the ones who are loving to you, the ones who rape you, the ones who give you a million dollars, the ones who are kind to you, the ones who steal from you, whatever it might be. The way you're treated and seen in the world. The main cause? Your past actions.

So Buddha puts every sentient in the very centre of our experiences. He says our actions are the main cause of why we are who we are and why what happens to us. All the good and all the bad. This applies to giraffes, dogs, ants, fish, humans – all “*sem-chens*”, the term in Tibetan for “sentient being”: “mind-possessor”. We’re all mind-possessors.

Buddha says that there’s not an atom of space where you won’t find mind-possessors. Trillions of them.

4. ENVIRONMENTAL KARMA

And fourth, they call it Environmental Karma. Environmental karma, which is the very way the physical world impacts upon us. For example, here we are sitting in this room. It’s quite pleasant, isn’t it? It’s quite peaceful, pleasant view out there, it’s quiet, you know – the walls aren’t dripping with mould. It’s pleasantly painted. It smells nice. No-one’s threatening us.

We take this for granted – we never ask, “Why are we having a pleasant experience?” For the Buddha there are very real causes created by us: this pleasant environmental experience is the result of our collective virtue.

If suddenly the building explodes, or a gunman comes in, *then* we’d ask, “Why is this happening?” This would be due to our collective non-virtuous karma.

Basically, Buddha’s point about karma is that suffering, which is when everything goes wrong – it could be externally, could be the people, could be the environment, could be in your own mind; when everything’s out of whack, out of balance, disharmonious, when the elements are all crazy, when people are all fighting, when people are mean to you, when your own mind’s berserk – all this is necessarily the result of negativity.

And happiness: same: the result of positive karma, virtuous actions.

I'M THE BOSS

The four ways our past karma ripens in the present – the very fact that you're this human being, with this very particular family and friends and people who harm us and people who help us; all our tendencies; and even the way the physical world impacts upon us – are all the result of our own actions. Necessarily. It's just the way it is. It's a natural law. It's not blame, it's not punishment. There's no concept of punishment or reward in Buddhism – that implies someone punishing and rewarding, doesn't it? And for the Buddha there's no one pulling the strings, no one running things.

Buddha says each one of us in charge. "We are the boss"! Big surprise! So if I am the boss of my own present experiences, if I am the cause of it, then indeed I can be the cause of my future experiences – which is why we should then check up: Do I like this life, do I like people punching me in the nose? Do I like having people being angry at me? Do I like being depressed and angry and jealous and poor and living in an ugly environment? No, I don't. Then, okay, there must be causes of this; what were they? Buddha lays it all out, all from his own observation, his own experience.

This is Buddhist practice.

FOUR WAYS THAT KILLING, FOR EXAMPLE, WOULD RIPEN

Let me give one example of one action and the four different ways it ripens; let's say "killing". If we look at the world, one of the most harmful things we do with our bodies is to kill other beings, wouldn't you agree? It's quite an intense way to harm any sentient being.

So, if as a result of the habit of killing in the past a strong seed of it is activated at the time of your death, it programs your consciousness to be reborn in a very suffering type of life such an animal or a spirit, for example.

Okay. So we can deduce in our case, it was morality that ripened because we got a human life, which as we discussed is the fruit of non-harming, in particular non-killing.

But look at the human realm: most humans kill something, don't they? Can you see that? Due to past killing, therefore, they're born with the tendency to keep killing. This is the worst one.

The third way killing ripens is as an experience: you get killed or you die young, or you get sick.

The fourth way, environmental karma, would be the very environment itself, the food, the water, etc., harms us. For some people just eating peanuts can kill them – that's a particular environmental karmic result for a person from past killing.

And we have the collective karma now to have poisoned water, polluted air, haven't we? The very elements themselves are harmful to us. That's the result of killing.

THE PRECIOUSNESS OF THIS HUMAN REBIRTH

Q: I can't see how being born as a dog is necessarily lower.

A: I understand. I understand. Okay. Where that fits is this. As nice as dogs are, would you agree they're not very bright? I mean, you talk to them about developing compassion, they don't really get it. You try to explain emptiness to them, they're a bit thick.

Let me put it this way. If you want a really long neck, best to be a giraffe. Guaranteed. If you want to fly, be a bird. But, honey, if you want to work with your mind, make changes to yourself, quit the causes of suffering, etc., etc., probably best to be a human.

So, it's a contextual thing. It's not high or low or some kind of hierarchy – it's a question of what you want to achieve. Lama Zopa Rinpoche said one time, if just for a couple of minutes you could have a direct experience of the mind of your little cute dog, the suffering, the mental suffering of the most profound ignorance of that mind would be so intense, you'd never want to waste another second of your precious human life. That's the ordinary ignorance of an animal's mind.

Now, we don't think this way in our culture, I agree. But just think about it – it's a different way to look at what ignorance is. We all have ignorance. Ignorance is the term for this ego-grasping that's this

panic state that rises as soon as we're attacked or insulted or hurt or don't get what we want. Well, animals live in that one. Your dog has been living in your house for years, and it barks every time it hears the gate squeak. By now you'd think he would have learned that it's the gate squeaking. But he doesn't, the poor thing, because he's paranoid. His big eyes are round, he's barking like crazy; his unhappy mind, honey, is called deep, deep ignorance, and fear: fear is a function of ego-grasping, of ignorance.

Buddhist psychology, remember, refers to all living beings, not just humans.

KARMA IS RIPENING AND WE'RE CREATING IT EVERY MICRO-SECOND

Q: Does the consciousness that moves from lifetime to lifetime – is that a ...collection of seeds or is it –

A: It's a collection of seeds or a bunch of programming.

Q: So, what happens, say for example in this life, like if a karmic seed has ripened, or a number of karmic seeds have ripened over a lifetime, that consciousness that moves on, it is based on those seeds that are left in the consciousness....

A: Every microsecond that you're existing – so, what's your name?

Q: Helen.

A: Okay. So here we have Helen. So your consciousness, every microsecond right now it's working. Every second, you're doing something, thinking something, feeling something, assuming something. Each second, you're programming your mind, aren't you? Every second, you're sowing a karmic seed. This is a way of saying it, for whatever we do, say and think that leaves imprints in the mind. So this is your consciousness. If you tracked it back, just logically going back, each second, each second, you get back to the first moment of conception, wouldn't you? Then you have to go back to a moment before that. And it's the same continuity of mind. And then a previous life, and a previous life and you go back a million lives.

So we can deduce that there's this particular tracking of consciousness that at this moment in time is labeled "Helen" on the basis of this particular human form. So that consciousness will continue to program it, program it, program it, and it leaves this body, and program, program, and takes another body, program, program – so it just keeps going.

The Buddha says we're usually not in charge of this process, because we think everybody else does it to us, it's not my fault, and how dare? and all this business. But if you're really in charge of this business, you're cleaning up your act. You're stopping programming your mind – as best you can – with more negativity. You're trying to program your mind with positivity, and you're purifying the seeds you've already grown – hopefully this is your spiritual procedure – until eventually you've cleaned up your mind completely and now you're an enlightened being. Do you see what I'm saying? This is a way of saying it.

Q: So, it is a collection that keeps on going from lifetime to lifetime until you...

A: ...cleaned up all the rubbish and grown up all the good. That's it. Precisely. That's it. That's what the process of becoming enlightened is all about. That's the Buddhist way of putting it. You understand. We're communicating, right?

Q: And every microsecond, we're experiencing the ripening of karma, and creating more.

A: Precisely. That's exactly right. That's exactly right. That's exactly the point. Every microsecond is the fruit of a past one, and on the basis of this we do more. So that's why we've got to get ahead of the game. Stop creating the negative ones, clean up our act, control body and speech, clean up the mind, rip out the negative ones from the mind so we quit that, and then grow the positive ones, and that finally eventually will be a mind that's now completely what they call "enlightened" – fully developed in goodness and completely rid of badness. That's what it is and that's where we're heading. So it's not a random thing... if one is in charge of the process, it's not a random

thing at all. You're really on track with it and you know what you're doing. You know what to do, what to say, what to think, what not to do, what not to say, what not to think, what seeds to sow, and you just keep on bopping.

COLOPHON

Teachings given at Osel Shen Phen Ling in Missoula, Montana, in 2011.

14. WE NEED BODHICHITTA!

LAMA YESHE

I think it is absolutely essential for us to have loving kindness towards others. There is no doubt about this. Loving kindness is the essence of bodhichitta, the attitude of the bodhisattva. Bodhichitta: literally “enlightened attitude.” It’s the culmination of practicing love and compassion; it’s an attitude of putting others first, wanting others to be happy, wanting to help others.

It is the most comfortable path, the most comfortable meditation. There can be no philosophical, scientific or psychological disagreement with this. With bodhichitta, there’s no East-West conflict. This path is the most comfortable, most perfect, one hundred percent uncomplicated one, free of any danger of leading people to extremes. Without bodhichitta, nothing works. And most of all, your meditation doesn’t work, and realizations don’t come.

Why is bodhichitta necessary for success in meditation? Because of selfish grasping. If you have a good meditation but don’t have bodhichitta, you will grasp at any little experience of bliss: “Me, me; I want more, I want more”. Then the good experience disappears completely. Grasping is the greatest distraction to experiencing single-pointed intensive awareness in meditation. And with it, we are always dedicated to our own happiness: “Me, me I’m miserable, I want to be happy. Therefore I’ll meditate”. It doesn’t work that way. For some reason good meditation and its results – peacefulness, satisfaction and bliss – just don’t come.

Also, without bodhichitta it is very difficult to collect merits. You create them and immediately destroy them; by afternoon, the morning’s merits have gone. It’s like cleaning a room and an hour later making it dirty again. You make your mind clean, then right away you mess it up – not a very profitable business. If you want to succeed in the business of collecting merits, you must have

bodhichitta. With bodhichitta you become so precious – like gold, like diamonds; you become the most perfect object in the world, beyond compare with any material things.

From the Western, materialistic point of view, we'd think it was great if a rich person said, "I want to make charity. I'm going to offer \$100 to everybody in the entire world". Even if that person gave with great sincerity, his or her merit would be nothing compared with just the thought, "I wish to actualize bodhichitta for the sake of sentient beings, and I'll practice the six perfections as much as I can". That's why I always say, actualization of bodhichitta is the most perfect path you can take. The best Dharma practice, the most perfect, most substantial, is without doubt the practice of bodhichitta.

Remember the story of the Kadampa geshe who saw a man circumambulating a stupa? He said, "What are you doing?" and the man answered, "Circumambulating". So the geshe said, "Wouldn't it be better if you practiced dharma?" Next time the geshe saw the man he was prostrating, and when he again asked what he was doing, the man replied, "One hundred thousand prostrations". "Wouldn't it be better if you practiced dharma?" asked the geshe. Anyway, the story goes on, but the point is that just doing religious-looking actions like circumambulation and prostration isn't necessarily practicing dharma. What we have to do is transform our attachment and self-cherishing, and if we haven't changed our mind in this way, none of the other practices work; doing them is just a joke. Even if you try to practice tantric meditations, unless you've changed within, you won't succeed. Dharma means a complete change of attitude – that's what really brings you inner happiness, that is the true Dharma, not the words you say.

Bodhichitta is not the culture of ego, not the culture of attachment, not the culture of samsara. It is an unbelievable transformation, the most comfortable path, the most substantial path – definite, not wishy-washy. Sometimes your meditation is not solid; you just space out. Bodhichitta meditation means you really want to change your mind and actions and transform your whole life.

We are all involved in human relationships with each other. Why do we sometimes say, “I love you”, and sometimes, “I hate you?” Where does this up-and-down mind come from? From the self-cherishing thought – a complete lack of bodhichitta. What we are saying is, “I hate you because I’m not getting any satisfaction from you. You hurt me; you don’t give me pleasure. That’s the whole thing: I – my ego, my attachment – am not getting satisfaction from you, therefore I hate you. What a joke! All the difficulties in inter-personal relationships come from not having bodhichitta, from not having changed our minds.

So, you see, just meditating is not enough. If that Kadampa geshe saw you sitting in meditation he’d say, “What are you doing? Wouldn’t it be better if you practiced dharma?” Circumambulating isn’t dharma, prostrating isn’t dharma, meditating isn’t dharma. My goodness, what is dharma, then? This is what happened to the man in the story. He couldn’t think of anything else to do. Well, the best dharma practice, the most perfect, most substantial, is without doubt the practice of bodhichitta.

You can prove scientifically that bodhichitta is the best practice to do. Our self-cherishing thought is the root of all human problems. It makes our lives difficult and miserable. The solution to self-cherishing, its antidote, is the mind that is its complete opposite – bodhichitta. The self-cherishing mind is worried about only me, me – the self-existent I. Bodhichitta substitutes others for self.

It creates space in your mind. Then even if your dearest friend forgets to give you a Christmas present, you don’t mind. “Ah, well. This year she didn’t give me my chocolate. It doesn’t matter.” Anyway, your human relationships are not for chocolate, not for sensory pleasures. Something much deeper can come from our being together, working together.

With bodhichitta you become so precious – like gold, like diamonds. You become the most perfect object in the world, beyond compare with any material things.

If you want to be really, really happy, it isn't enough just to space out in meditation. Many people who have spent years alone in meditation have finished up the worse for it. Coming back into society, they have freaked out. They haven't been able to take contact with other people again, because the peaceful environment they created was an artificial condition, still a relative phenomenon without solidity. With bodhichitta, no matter where you go, you will never freak out. The more you are involved with people the more pleasure you get. People become the resource of your pleasure. You are living for people. Even though some still try to take advantage of you, you understand: "Well, in the past I took advantage of them many times too". So it doesn't bother you.

Thus bodhichitta is the most perfect way to practice dharma, especially in our twentieth-century Western society. It is very, very worthwhile. With the foundation of bodhichitta you will definitely grow.

If you take a proper look deep into your heart you will see that one of the main causes of your dissatisfaction is the fact that you are not helping others as best you can. When you realize this you'll be able to say to yourself, "I must develop myself so that I can help others satisfactorily. By improving myself I can definitely help". Thus you have more strength and energy to meditate, to keep pure morality and do other good things. You have energy, "Because I want to help others". That is why Lama Tsongkhapa said that bodhichitta is the foundation of all enlightened realizations.

Also, bodhichitta energy is alchemical. It transforms all your ordinary actions of body, speech and mind – your entire life into positivity and benefit for others, like iron transmuted into gold. I think this is definitely true. You can see, it's not difficult. For example look at other people's faces. Some people, no matter what problems and suffering they are enduring, when they go out they always try to appear happy and show a positive aspect to others. Have you noticed this or not? But other people always go about miserable, and angry.

What do you think about that? I honestly think that it indicates a fundamental difference in the way these two kinds of people think. Human beings are actually very simple. Some are a disaster within and it shows on their faces and makes those whom they meet feel sick. Others, even though they are suffering intensely, always put on a brave face because they are considerate of the way others feel.

I believe this is very important. What's the use of putting out a miserable vibration? Just because you feel miserable, why make others unhappy too? It doesn't help. You should try to control your emotions, speak evenly and so forth. Sometimes when people are suffering they close off from others, but you can still feel their miserable vibration. This doesn't help – others with even momentary happiness forget about leading them to enlightenment. To help the people around you, you have to maintain a happy, peaceful vibration. This is very practical, very worthwhile. Sometimes we talk too much about enlightenment and things like that. We have a long way to go to such realizations. Forget about enlightenment, I don't care about buddhahood – just be practical. If you can't help others, at least don't give them any harm, stay neutral.

Anyway, what I'm supposed to be telling you here is that bodhichitta is like atomic energy to transform your mind. This is absolutely, scientifically true, and not something that you have to believe with blind religious faith. Everybody nowadays is afraid of nuclear war, but if we all had bodhichitta, wouldn't we all be completely secure? Of course we would. With bodhichitta you control all desire to defeat or kill others. And, as Lama Je Tsongkhapa said, when you have bodhichitta all the good things in life are magnetically attracted to you and pour down upon you like rain. At present all we attract is misfortune because all we have is the self-cherishing thought. But with bodhichitta we'll attract good friends, good food, good everything.

As His Holiness the Dalai Lama said recently, if you're going to be selfish, do it on a grand scale; wide selfishness is better than narrow! What did His Holiness mean? He was saying that, in a way,

bodhichitta is like a huge selfish attitude because when you dedicate yourself to others with loving kindness you get a lot more pleasure than you would otherwise. With our present, usual selfish attitude we experience very little pleasure, and what we have is easily lost. With “great selfishness” you help others and you help yourself; with small it’s always me, me, me and it is easy to lose everything.

Remember, Atisha had over 150 teachers? He respected them all, but when he heard the name of one – Lama Dharmarakshita – he would come out in goose-bumps. He explained this by saying, “I received many teachings from many, many great gurus, but for me, Lama Dharmarakshita, who gave me the bodhichitta ordination and teachings on the method and wisdom of bodhichitta and the six paramitas, was the most helpful for my life”. This is very true. Sometimes techniques of deity meditation are extremely difficult, but bodhichitta meditation is so simple, so incredibly profound and real. That’s why Atisha would shake when he heard the name of his main teacher of bodhichitta.

The main point, then, is that when you contact Buddhadharma you should conquer the mad elephant of your self-cherishing mind. If the dharma you hear helps you diminish your self-cherishing even a little, it has been worthwhile. But if the teachings you have taken have had no effect on your selfishness, then from the Mahayana point of view, even if you can talk intellectually on the entire lam-rim, they have not been must use at all.

Do you recall the story of Shantideva and how people used to put him down? They used to call him *Du-she-sum-pa*, which means one who knows how to do only three things: eating, sleeping and excreting. This was a very bad thing to call someone, especially a monk. But that’s all that people could see him doing. However, he had bodhichitta, so whatever he did, even ordinary things, was of greatest benefit to others. Lying down, peacefully, he would meditate with great concern for the welfare of all living beings, and many times, out of compassion, he would cry for them. Westerners need that kind of practice. Fundamentally we are lazy. Well, maybe not

lazy, but when we finish work we are tired and don't have much energy left. So, when you come home from work, lie down comfortably and meditate on bodhichitta. This is most worthwhile. Much better than rushing in speedily, throwing down a coffee and dropping onto your meditation cushion to try to meditate. It doesn't work that way; your nervous system needs time and space. You can't be rushing through traffic one minute and sitting quietly meditating the next. Everything takes time and space. It is much better to have a quiet, blissful cup of coffee, and don't pressure yourself either; that too is very bad. Don't punish yourself when you are too tired to meditate: "I should be meditating; I am very bad". You destroy yourself like this. Be wise. Treat yourself, your mind, sympathetically, with loving kindness. If you are gentle with yourself you will become gentle with others so don't push. Pushing doesn't work for me, that's why I tell others not to force themselves. We are dealing with the mind, not rocks and concrete; it is something organic.

In a way, bodhichitta is like a huge selfish attitude because when you dedicate yourself to others with loving kindness you get a lot more pleasure than you would otherwise.

The Western environment offers lots of suffering conditions that act as causes for our actualizing bodhichitta, so life there can be very worthwhile. For example, it is much better to subdue an adversary with bodhichitta than with a knife or gun. When attacked, you can practice loving kindness. We could also do this in the monasteries of Tibet, where there were often horrible monks. Don't think that Tibet was full of only holy people – we had unbelievably wild monks there that nobody in authority could subdue! If you would try to control them wrathfully they would get only more aggressive. But arya bodhisattva monks, people who had completely given themselves up for others, would treat them with loving kindness, and the wild monks would calm down completely. They would feel, "This man

loves me; he has great compassion. He has given up everything for others and has nothing to lose”. In that way aggressive people would be subdued, without authority but with bodhichitta. There are many stories about this kind of thing, but I’m not going to tell them now. Perhaps you think they’re funny, but it’s true – you can conquer your enemies, both internal and external, with loving kindness and bodhichitta. It is most worthwhile and there’s no contradiction bodhichitta is the totally comfortable path to liberation and enlightenment.

In his text Lama Choepa, the Panchen Lama says, “Self-cherishing is the cause of all misery and dissatisfaction, and holding all mother sentient beings dearer than oneself is the foundation of all realizations and knowledge. Therefore bless me to change self-cherishing into concern for all others”. This is not some deep philosophical theory but a very simple statement. You know from your own life’s experiences without needing a Tibetan text’s explanations that your self-cherishing thought is the cause of all your confusion and frustration. This evolution of suffering is found not only in Tibetan culture but in yours as well.

And the Panchen Lama goes on to say that we should look at what the Buddha did. He gave up his self-attachment and attained all the sublime realizations. But look at us we are obsessed with me, me, me and have realized nothing but unending misery. This is very clear isn’t it? Therefore you should know clean clear how this works. Get rid of the false concept of self-cherishing and you’ll be free of all misery and dissatisfaction. Concern yourself for the welfare of all others and wish for them to attain the highest realizations such as bodhichitta and you’ll find all happiness and satisfaction.

Bodhichitta is the most perfect way to practice dharma, especially in our twentieth century Western society. It is very, very worthwhile. With the foundation of bodhichitta you will definitely grow.

You people are young, intelligent and not satisfied with what you have in your own countries. That's why you are seeking further afield. And now you have found that most worthwhile of all things, bodhichitta.

But it is not an easy thing. Easy things bore you quickly. It is quite difficult, but there's no way you'll get bored practicing it. People need to be most intelligent to actualize bodhichitta, some, though, have no room for it. "Forget about yourself and have a little concern for others?" they'll ask. "That's not my culture". It is very difficult to change holding yourself dear into holding others dear instead – the most difficult task you can undertake. But it is the most worthwhile and brings the greatest satisfaction.

After practicing some meditations, such as impermanence and death, for a month you'll say, "I'm tired of that meditation". But you'll never get tired of meditating on bodhichitta. It is so deep; a universal meditation. You'll never get tired of bodhichitta.

You have heard of many deities that you can meditate on, many deities to be initiated into – Chenrezig and the rest. What are they all for? I'll tell you – for gaining bodhichitta. As a matter of fact, all tantric meditations are for the development of strong bodhichitta. That is the purpose of your consciousness manifesting as a being with 1000 arms so that you can lend a hand to a thousand suffering beings. If you don't like to manifest yourself this way you can relate the meditation to your own culture and see yourself as Jesus. Avalokiteshvara and Jesus are the same: completely selfless and completely devoted to serving others.

Remember what happened the first time that Avalokiteshvara took the bodhisattva ordination? He vowed to guide all universal living beings to enlightenment from behind, like a shepherd. "I do not want to realize enlightenment until first I have led all mother sentient beings there first. That will be my satisfaction". He worked for years and years, leading thousands of beings to enlightenment, but when he checked to see what was happening he found there were still countless more. So again he worked for years and years and

again when he checked there were still so many left, and this cycle was repeated until finally he was fed up and thought to himself, “For aeons and aeons I have struggled to lead all sentient beings to enlightenment but there are still so many left. I think it is impossible to fulfil my vow”. And because of the intensity of his emotion his head split into eleven pieces. Then Amitabha Buddha came and offered to help, and blessed him to be successful.

So I’m sure some of you people can be like Chenrezig. The main thing is to have strong motivation. Even if it comes strongly only once, it is extremely powerful. It is very rare to have this kind of thought. A mere flash is so worthwhile; to have it for a minute for a day...