

A Key to Buddhist Wisdom Teachings

by Jason Espada

A Key to Buddhist Wisdom Teachings - Preface

Some time ago, I had the thought to collect different expressions of Buddhist Wisdom teachings from books, for my own purposes, and to share with others. For a while I did just this, and I also found myself writing essays on different teachings, for clarity' sake, whenever I could see what they are getting at, and had some experience. The last five years or so have been productive, and I decided I'd like to publish what I have, in three volumes, with the title *A Compendium of Buddhist Wisdom Teachings*. My purpose is simply to make as many of these treasured teachings as I can more available to the general reader and student.

This volume, *A Key to Buddhist Wisdom Teachings* contains a few of my favorite essays drawn from this larger work.

Someone opening a book or going to a talk and coming across wisdom teachings for the first time will likely respond as I did. They can be inspiring, but hard to follow. Whether they are the teachings on anatta - no self, or the Heart Sutra, the Middle Way, Great Perfection or Mahamudra, we can feel like we're suddenly in a new world. It's understandable that we may want to know where these teachings fit into Buddhism in general.

What I've found is that all the different expressions of Buddhist Wisdom *do* fit together. There is a harmony between them, even if that is not always expressed in the various teachings themselves. They can be complimentary, and it can be enriching to study in more than one tradition of teachings. To begin with though, going chronologically, they all make more sense, as I hope will become clear in what follows.

My aim with the collection I originally had in mind, and the Compendium, and with this small book is to provide an overall map of the Buddhist wisdom teachings, and a way to enter in their practice. If I can do this much, my aim will have been accomplished.

I would especially like to encourage others to find one approach they resonate with, and to study and practice along those lines until they get some positive result. Then the other traditions of teaching will be easier to understand.

The following is from A Compendium of Buddhist Wisdom Teachings

I.

I would like to present in the pages that follow an overview of Buddhist Wisdom teachings. I would do this so that any time in the future someone picks up any one of these precious teachings, they will know where they fit into the history of Buddhist thought and practice, what came before, what criticisms and errors they were addressing, and what came after, from a practical point of view.

I think if we understand one of them, experientially, the others are in the palm of our hand, so the practice the realization of what they are talking about comes first, otherwise we may become just scholars of the word, rather than the meaning...

It's true that these subjects can be difficult to understand fully. They can take years or lifetimes to master. Here I will simply introduce these subjects in a way that may be useful to other students...

II.

A thumbnail sketch

A very brief overview of the development of Buddhist Wisdom teachings

When the Buddha taught *annatta* – no self, he did so to help free those he was speaking with from their misapprehension of a self where there is no self, never has been, and never will be. The 'self' we conceive of, of ourself,

of others, and of objects in this world, is an invention, a fabrication, a complete fiction. Sometimes the wisdom teachings of the Buddha are referred to as having been given in 'the First Turning of the Wheel'.

That the teachings worked for many of the men and women in the first centuries after the historical Buddha taught, shows itself in the spread not only of the teachings geographically, but also in terms of how they were expressed.

Sometimes the emphasis was placed on one part of the teachings, and sometimes new language was used to express those very same original ideas, to correct common mistakes, to make it easier to understand the Buddha's intent, and to experience the results of practice.

A common mistake on hearing the no self teachings was to take them as being nihilistic, and so, as expedient means, first the *Prajnaparamita*, or *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, and then *the Middle Way* school developed. These are referred to as being part of the Second Turning of the Wheel.

They had (and have) the aim of delineating the wisdom teachings of the Buddha more clearly, so that both the errors of self grasping and of falling into the belief that nothing exists or matters could be corrected. The *Prajnaparamita* also emphasizes the importance of compassion, and the dedication to the well being of all that lives.

Then, what this moving beyond ego grasping makes abundantly clear is that we are more than we ever thought we were, and that others have a greater depth and potential than we ever realized they had. This brings us to *the Nature of Mind*, and the Third Turning of the Wheel, which is on *Buddha Nature*, and *Pure Perception*, which is also called *Sacred Outlook*.

* * *

It is my hope that this volume will make the treasures of Wisdom teachings accessible, easier to understand, and to practice.

Jason Espada
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Introductory essays

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Measuring Progress in Wisdom Practice

*To the extent that afflictive emotions exist,
ego grasping exists;
and to the extent that ego grasping exists,
emptiness has not been realized*

It's helpful from the beginning of the study and practice of Buddhist Wisdom Teachings to have a way to tell if they are having the intended effect, of first reducing and then freeing the mind completely from suffering. Without any standard in mind, we may engage these teachings on just an intellectual level, or not be relating them directly to our own experience and gaining their full benefit.

The standard I use comes from the Historical Buddha's teachings, and that of his accomplished followers. Even for someone hearing these teachings for the first time, it's useful to know their purpose.

*To the extent that afflictive emotions exist,
ego grasping exists*

The clearest sign that delusion is present is that we suffer from the afflictions, of craving, anger, fear and sadness, pride and jealousy. This is only on the surface, but just as a plant or a tree always has a root, these difficult emotions are all based on wrong view, defined in Buddhism as ego grasping:

We take ourselves and others and our world to be independent, unitary, fixed in nature. This falls apart upon investigation, but the believed in wrong view persists, and can be recognized.

When we dream, we are convinced that what we are seeing is real. When we wake up, or even just begin to wake up, the emotion goes out of our responses to the dream.

It's also not just that self grasping is either there, or not, but there are degrees to it, which is why I begin this thought with '*to the extent that...*'

Ego grasping can be subtle. It can manifest lightly, or for a brief time, or it can exist in us *as a tendency*.

Lama Zopa taught on one phrase, *Remove dirt, and smell*, referring to *the tendency* of the mind that can be felt to form an idea of self or another, and in ignorance to take hold of it as who we are.

In the Buddhist teaching on how we either get caught or find freedom within, after basic ignorance comes karmic formation, which is represented as a person at a potter's wheel, an image I find very useful. We can identify what it feels like to shape an idea, and then to fixate upon it. This is what it's like to produce, and then mistakenly grasp what is only a concept of self, and take it to be who we are.

It's said:

Things exist differently than the way they appear

The guideline I use then goes a step further than identifying merely ego grasping as the cause of the afflictive emotions, in saying,

*to the extent that ego grasping exists,
emptiness has not been realized*

This makes it clear to my mind that ego grasping itself is in turn *a result*, or *an effect*. It has a cause, which is *a-vidya*, or ignorance, not seeing. On account of this ignorance that does not perceive the way things exist, ego grasping arises.

The opposite of and the antidote to ego grasping has been variously described as: the direct knowledge and vision of things as they really are

(yatha-bhuta-ñana-dassana) as perceiving emptiness, or annata, that the self we conceive of and take hold of is not what is here in truth. This leads to letting go, we can say, in a sense, or the cessation of grasping, because we see there is nothing to attach *to*, in actuality.

Appearances, thoughts and ideas still arise, of course, and we can make use of them to serve our purposes, but there is this crucial difference: with wisdom we *see through* our concepts, transparently, and are not caught by them.

In a recent teaching on Mind Training, the Dalai Lama said that:

Because of wrong view, self grasping, the destructive emotions such as anger and attachment arise; If you are able to reduce this clinging to an I, it will help reduce your anger, attachment, and so forth...

We can say that *to the extent that emptiness is realized*, or the true nature of how we and all others, objects, places and events exist, then self grasping ignorance *lessens* and is removed, and the afflictive emotions also come to an end. This is the Third Noble Truth, the cessation of suffering.

Again this can go from a brief recognition, to one that lasts longer, and goes deeper, removing both the cause and the result of suffering.

From the outset this much at least should be known, so that we each can monitor our own progress, cultivating insight and freedom.

*To the extent that emptiness has been realized,
naturally, ego grasping does not exist*

*and to the extent that ego grasping does not exist,
the afflictive emotions are pacified, and removed*

Like this, through Wisdom, one attains liberation.

Temporal and Ultimate Benefit

When we wish for ourselves and others 'may you enjoy every temporal and ultimate benefit', it is a profound prayer, generous and far seeing. It expresses the wish for health and safety, peace and enjoyment now and in the future, and for the best kinds of happiness and fulfillment...

In Buddhism, we speak of temporal and ultimate benefits we can have in this life and offer to others. When we pray as Buddhists, or as someone with an awareness of spiritual truths, this covers the full range of what we wish for ourselves and others to have.

Temporal benefits begin with what are called 'the four requisites', of food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. They then also include long life, good health and vitality, as well as freedom from fear, and the other negative emotions. When I think of the temporal kinds of happiness we can have here, I think also of the enjoyment of friendship, love and beauty. These are things we all need and naturally want for ourselves and others.

The ultimate benefits we can receive and give, by contrast, in Buddhism and in other religions as well, are the deep truths that those traditions can teach us. When we receive a teaching and put it into practice and gain the result, we can say we have received the gift of that teaching.

Buddhism emphasizes in particular its wisdom teachings as the supreme gift that is offered, and that can be received through a person's realization. The reason this considered an ultimate benefit is that in Buddhism and other religions, it is ignorance of truth or spiritual reality that is the cause of all our deprivation, discord, and dissatisfaction. Without wisdom, we may gain some short-lived possession, but as long as we are acting under the influence of greed, aggression and a fundamental misunderstanding of ourselves and others, whatever we have acquired will eventually fall away.

The fine temporary conditions we may have now are, at best, something we can use to develop more lasting freedom, happiness, health and peace. If we don't see this, and instead lose ourselves in our temporary good fortune, we will have lost out on a great opportunity to find a more lasting safety, and a stable happiness and well being not dependent on conditions. Such is the ultimate benefit that we can all acquire, so religions tell us, and share with others.

Where traditions have fallen short over the centuries, is either in not effectively offering their deepest gifts to the world, or more often in being far removed from our daily lives and needs. This is where the prayer and the action recognizing of the importance of our temporal needs and wishes become so important. Without our basic human needs being seen and addressed, religions become disconnected from our human struggles and desires.

Even for someone without children, it is fine thought experiment to imagine what we would wish for a young person we cared deeply for. We would naturally wish for them those things we've found to be vitally important in our own lives, such as art and friendship, learning and self confidence, and the feeling of being loved and appreciated. We would also wish for them the good food we have enjoyed, and more, the beautiful scenery, the enrichment that comes from the arts, and the delight and satisfaction of having been part of something larger than ourselves. These are all wishes that come as naturally as breathing to any parent, any friend or loving person.

Some of us are like scouts, going out ahead of our group to see what lies ahead. If we were moving to a new land, we would look for a place to settle that had fresh water, a temperate climate and good soil. We would naturally seek a place where we could be safe together, and raise our families in peace. While others work the land, some of us have gone out to find medicine, or the best roots, herbs, fruits and grains to heal and nourish

our families. We return with these gifts, and offer them respectfully, with a heart full of love.

If we have lived enough seasons, we know when the river will crest, when to move inland, and where to plant next. We wouldn't want any of our family to sleep too long, just because it's high Summer.

In the same way, all the temporal benefits we share now need to be known as fragile and ephemeral, precious and uncertain. They are to be enjoyed gratefully as long as we have them, but not seen as an end point by themselves. If we are wise, we don't fall into that trap of believing our enjoyments are all there is to living, and if we are compassionate, we warn others not to either.

I like the word 'provisional', because of its etymology of 'provision' – as in, what a traveller uses to get from one place to another. Temporal benefits are like this. Although they do not last, they are also essential for us on our journey. And so I will pray

May we all have every temporal and ultimate benefit

*May we all have everything we need
to be safe, and healthy,
and to have long lives,
enriched with education, friendships,
and experience*

And

*May we all find freedom and ease,
lasting happiness, and peace*

The Knowledge of Liberation

What makes the Buddhist teachings a great treasure to us all is that it teaches the way to freedom from suffering. When we first hear this, we may find it hard to believe, but if we investigate, test the teachings and begin to have some experience ourselves, our faith and dedication to practice naturally develop.

It's only natural at one point that we idealize and romanticize the Buddha and accomplished sages. We imagine what it must be like to be free from aggression, greed and ignorance about ourselves and others and our world. We place teachers and the teachings on a pedestal, and far from ourselves.

Perhaps we imagine that liberation is sudden and irreversible, since there are stories of his happening this way for people in the past. We may wonder how it's going to be, but this is only making it seem removed from where we are now.

There's a way of understanding and engaging inner freedom that is set out in the Sutra on the Foundations of Mindfulness. In this teaching, we're encouraged first *to be aware of our experience*, and then *to notice what causes came together* to produce our inner state, up to and including liberation.

The pattern is the same, we'll see, for the hindrances being present or absent, and for positive qualities and experiences:

The Sutra on the Establishments of Mindfulness outlines this process

Here, monks, for example, if sensual desire (or the other hindrances) are present in himself, a monk knows that they are present. If absent, a monk knows that they are absent.

He knows how the unarisen hindrance comes to arise,

and he knows how the abandonment of arisen hindrance comes about,

and he knows how the non-arising of the abandoned hindrance in the future will come about...

The removal of faults, we know, does not happen by itself. There are the practices, of ethics, meditation and wisdom to be done, and so when the text here says, 'and he knows *how* the abandonment comes about...' it is referring to our knowledge and application of effective methods.

The same outline can be used for the development of qualities:

Here, monks, for example, if patience (or the other qualities) are present in himself, a monk knows they are present. If absent, a monk knows that they are absent.

He knows how unarisen patience comes to arise,

and he knows how the maintenance of arisen patience comes about,

and he knows how the the increased development of arisen patience in the future will come about...

When it comes to the mind being either caught or free, the Sutra says

he knows a deluded mind as deluded,

an undeluded mind as undeluded;

a contracted mind as contracted,

a distracted mind as distracted;

a developed mind as developed,

an undeveloped mind as undeveloped;

a surpassed mind as surpassed,

*an unsurpassed mind as unsurpassed;
a concentrated mind as concentrated,
an unconcentrated mind as unconcentrated;*

*and a liberated mind as liberated,
an unliberated mind as unliberated...*

There are times when our mind *is* relatively or greatly free from ego grasping, and free from the afflictive emotions, and we should recognize when this is so. And not only should we enjoy this state of being, but we should understand what caused the experience of whatever inner freedom we have to arise for us. *This is the knowledge of liberation.*

Following the pattern from laid out in the Foundations of Mindfulness Sutra

*We know when our mind is freed from self grasping and difficult emotions,
and we know how this state came to be;
we know how an unfree mind comes to be freed,
and how once freed, such an experience is made to continue...*

The Buddha's teachings on causality are not to be taken as dogma, but as encouragement to see for ourselves. What has been taught and celebrated as *the dharani of dependent origination* says:

'Om ye dharmā hetu prabhavā hetun teṣāṃ tathāgato hya vadat teṣāṃ ca yo nirodha evaṃ vādī mahāśramaṇaḥ svaha'

and this is translated as

*"All phenomena arise from causes;
Those causes have been taught by the Tathagata,
And their cessation too has been proclaimed by the Great Shramana."*

We may use methods of sila, samadhi, and prajna, looking deeply at the annata nature of our experience; we may investigate along the lines of the Prajna Paramita or Middle Way to develop discernment and freedom; and with faith and devotion, love and compassion, we may directly experience our profound nature. Whatever methods we use, if we know when we have attained their result in meditation, even momentarily, and realize how this experience has come into being for us, then we hold a most precious treasure.

*May all beings be forever liberated,
and now and always
may we share the joy and peace of inner freedom
with all our family*

Begin With A Deep and Clear Mind

When we take up the study and practice of liberating wisdom, the best place to begin is with a deep and clear mind. There are very good reasons for this, which I will try to explain.

We may study extensively, and even understand and be able to talk knowledgeably about traditions of teachings, without having attained any of the results the Buddha and the sages that followed after him would have us realize. The reason for that lack of realization is that the mind holding these precious teachings is still a superficial mind, which can be deceptive, especially in our 21st century Western culture.

We equate book learning, degrees and recognition too easily with wisdom, and while there is a great advantage to having an education, it doesn't compare to getting the result from a practice.

Teachings here can be compared to recipes, and actually sitting down and reflecting on the teachings, meditating according to a good teacher's instructions can be compared to preparing the food, eating, and being well nourished. It shows in our attitudes and actions, in our thoughts and words and how we are in this world from that point on.

Intellectual knowing alone can be deceptive for another reason. It is aloof, disengaged, and for now seemingly somehow above it all. We may even admire such a status and hope for it ourselves. I have the impression though that intellectuals aren't suffering very much at the moment, and they are not really registering the suffering of others, otherwise they would have an urgency to their study, practice, and teaching that is not at all evident. *This is the most important teaching to realize, both for our own sake, and more importantly, for the sake of all others who suffer in a great many ways, lost, confused, and without a way out known to them. How can we be anything other than passionate about liberating ourselves and them all?*

Begin with a deep and clear mind

In contrast to these usual ways of learning that we all know so well, if we begin the study and practice of Buddhist liberating wisdom with a settled, clear, and attentive mind, we will find them much easier to apply directly to our mind, and to receive their benefit. We don't have to have the deepest possible mind right away - even having *a deeper mind than usual* will be a help right away.

We will see then that the effectiveness of these teachings depends on how well and fully we are able to engage them.

And this in turn will lead us to cultivate and maintain, and deepen our basic meditation practice, of shinay, calm abiding, or the factors of jhana, as *a basis* for liberating practice.

If we see the importance of this, we will naturally take up this kind of integrated practice, for all our sake.

What do I mean by a deep, clear, and collected mind? The characteristics of a mind that is able to understand and apply teachings are that it is lucid, bright, flexible, calm, settled, and present. It is more subtle. The energies of the mind are collected, or gathered together. With this kind of a mind we can cultivate in meditation, we can penetrate whatever it is we are studying, and, more specifically, we can see into the nature of our experience in the present moment.

There are degrees to this, surely, and the best kind of mind to bring to the study of liberating wisdom teachings, what we should aim to have, is one that goes deep, and is thorough, and comprehensive. We can gradually cultivate, and carefully, devotedly maintain a mind that sees fully into what is talked about, or written, or observed directly.

At times, as we all have known, our mind is scattered, confused, opaque, or superficial, just staying with an object or thought for a moment before jumping off to something else. At other times we've known our mind to go relatively deeper and to be more collected, and that's what I'm referring to here. This much we are all familiar with. That can lead us over time in the right direction. As Ajahn Chah said, *Just be aware of whether your mind is a little concentrated, or a lot. That way it will develop on its own.*

We can develop the power of concentration, to illuminate what we are learning, or directly observing. This can be fruitful.

Part of the problem that needs to be addressed, recognized and remedied, is the usual way wisdom teachings are presented these days. It's usually the case that when we hear a teacher give a talk, or when we read an article on vipassana, or anatta, or the Heart Sutra or shunyata, the Middle Way or any approach to liberation, it's done so without reference to *this very basis* that can make all the difference in terms of our gaining realization for ourselves or not. It is a mystery, why this is so these days, but there you have it.

Allowances have been made in the Buddhist tradition, for what are called 'wisdom types', where it's recognized that some people can hear a teaching and right away get the experience of what is being talked about. It's recorded that this happened in the Buddha's own time, and through the ages it's been known to happen, and celebrated. But initial recognition and having that be a stable experience for a person are two different things, and so most of the time, if we follow up on someone's enlightenment story, there's a practice that follows, integrating what was known and understood after that initial recognition.

Teachings can be likened to seeds - they have the potential to blossom when we add water and sunlight, and care, and time.

Some people's minds are like dry earth - we can plant any kind of seed there, but it won't take hold or grow.

Other people's minds are quite ready, and have a lot of positive qualities already in them. For example, they may be peaceful, patient, and gentle, and loving, and not too attached to sense pleasures. They may be humble, 'contented, and easily satisfied', as it says in the Metta Sutta, or have a lot of faith and devotion, joy, and diligence, and aspiration - the strong desire to know and to be liberated. When they receive teachings, by comparison, they make sense and are realized quickly.

It's up to us to study our own minds in relation to the teachings we receive, and take up whatever practices will help us to realize them fully. The best a teacher or tradition can do for us is present methods we can use, and hold up examples of realization for us to follow. This is the great blessing of our traditions.

How much we suffer from this point forward depends on how well and deeply we realize liberating wisdom. We may study and practice even these precious teachings for years and not gain their full result, because the conditions haven't been sufficient for it in our mind.

I write this from personal experience then, and with the great wish that whoever takes up the study and practice of the Buddhist wisdom teachings will gain their benefit as quickly as possible, putting their own suffering to an end, and enabling them to be present and the greatest possible help to all others.

Intellect and Intuition

To understand any deep subject, we need to use both reason and intuition. It's helpful to have a clear idea of these faculties of ours, so we can see if we're fully engaged in what we are learning.

The intellect is easiest to describe, since it is what we have been taught to use from an early age. We think sequentially, and critically; we acquire information and make assessments. What we're *not* told is that the intellect has its limitations.

Rational understanding goes only so far, and nowhere is this more evident than when it comes to studying the self, or the mind, and the kind of knowledge that transforms. Too much reliance on the intellect is as much of an obstacle to learning as not using our reason. Over thinking something, or obsessive thought, without being able to quiet the mind, is fatiguing, and just stays on the surface.

'The Bellows'

Some Eastern Traditions go to the extreme of rejecting thought altogether when it comes to deeper learning. I never entirely trusted that view, and it wasn't until I came across the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition that I heard of an ideal, balanced way to use the intellect in study.

Their word for meditation, translates to *familiarization*, and they have a metaphor that points out the best use of reason. They say intellectual study can be like using a bellows to make a fire increase. Once the flames get going, they say, the bellows can be set aside. We can reflect, and when an experience or subject of study becomes clear to our mind, we can set aside reason, and just stay directly with that theme, immersing ourselves in what we would know. This is the ideal.

The intuition is less well defined, but its' working is tangible, and something we are all familiar with.

The intuition is heart-knowledge. It understands directly, without the intermediary of thought;

It knows comprehensively, taking in all factors and relationships at once;

It is single, simple, and thoroughgoing, and it is felt more in the body than thought alone.

These two, the intellect and intuition, should work together, each informing and supporting the other. Not enough intuition, and we're left with dry knowledge. If what we learn stays only on the level of intellect nothing moves, nothing transforms.

Another extreme is when a person relies too much on their intuition and becomes anti-intellectual, which is also a limitation. We may not know what we know, or be able to express it, or assimilate it with our rational side, as far as that may go.

Our non conceptuality should not lapse into dullness. Using the intellect well sharpens our mind, so that when we let go of concepts, our perceptions are bright and clear.

Quieting ourselves, enjoying silence, becoming attuned to the totality of being, feeling, and direct knowing in sitting and walking meditation in turn supports our strength of mind and clarity of thought.

Try different proportions of study and reflection, and quiet meditation, assimilating what has been learned. Sometimes just a few words are enough, and at other times, we can benefit from more extensive study and use of our rational intelligence. Experiment over time and see what works best for you. This is how we can learn to unfold their power for ourselves.

Using both reason and intuition, depending on what we need, strengthening each, is the way to progress in the study of these deep subjects.

The Touchstone of Buddhist Wisdom Practice

The aim of all Buddhist wisdom teachings is to liberate the mind from suffering. No matter how they are explained, it comes down to this.

In the first Buddhist dispensation, it was very clear that the purpose of practice was to experience for ourselves *annata* - selflessness, meaning that the self we take ourselves to be is not found when we look within. It is a thought of something that doesn't exist *at all* in the way it appears. This self grasping was identified by the Buddha as the cause of all our inconceivable suffering from beginningless time, that will continue until *annata* is realized.

As Ajaan Thate expressed it:

Mental phenomena will stop only when insight discerns its causal factors, and uproots their underlying causes.

Some lineages leave it there, and insist that's all that can be said that's useful in any way. Others take it further.

The realization of selflessness is so much more than a glimpse, as important as that first flash of insight is for a person. The traditions say that first we understand intellectually, then we have some experience, of short or longer duration, and then we *realize* the teaching, we become one with it.

In the centuries after the Buddha, countless people realized *annata*, and freed their minds from suffering. Eventually, out of the same compassionate motivation, new language appeared to express the same point, and for the same purpose.

The term '*shunyata*', or '*emptiness*' started to be used and taken up in Buddhist wisdom practice as what needs to be realized. Emptiness here refers to the selflessness of persons, and also of objects, places and events. So, when it says in the Heart Sutra that '*all dharmas are marked with emptiness*', it means they have this characteristic of being without the idea of identity or self nature that we project and then take hold of as if it were separate from our own mind.

The point remains the same however, whether we call it annata, or shunyata, emptiness - that of the liberating insight that frees the mind from grasping onto what is not actually there, but only habitually, reflexively thought of, imagined, and then held onto. We do this all the time, with places, people, objects we label; with moods, and events. We reify, or 'concretize' it. We solidify our thoughts and so these teachings can be tremendously helpful as we look into our mind and experience, and as we go through our day, interacting with others.

The problem with using a common term like emptiness, of course, is that it has these other meanings, and so it's just here that we need to know what characterizes a Buddhist wisdom teaching. Meditating on emptiness in the way this word is commonly understood won't accomplish the intended aim.

The insight that the self does not exist as we imagine is key to all lineages and expressions of teaching. If we know this and then hear the word 'empty', or 'emptiness', we'll know exactly what that refers to, no more and no less.

A room can be empty, as in, without anything in it, and our mind as well can be empty, as in without any object, but that does not mean that, seeing this we recognize the vital point of egolessness, or the actual, natural lack of a separate self.

A clear, thought free mind can also have this insight vividly present, in which case it sees through appearances, understanding their nature, and is caught by them. No emotional reactions develop, and the traces remaining from past reactivity in the mind gradually fade away. No ego, no suffering.

Not seeing an object in our mind is also different from recognizing that there is no self that can be taken hold of that is not merely our own thought. Anything we imagine is just a projection, and not what is actually here, the inconceivable depth of our true nature.

This takes us right up to seeing the nature of mind, that is clear and open, and well gone - beyond the concepts of self and other.

Empty Emptiness

Emptiness can be the recognition of no self, when we see that what has been habitually conceived of does not actually exist as we thought. Here, as it's said, 'not seeing is perfect seeing'. Emptiness can also be what is revealed, the clear light nature of mind that was hidden behind emotions and concepts.

Some kinds of emptiness do not liberate. They can be lacking the essential realization of annata, or selflessness, in which case they are not an antidote to samsara. They may be very pleasant, or an intense experience, but they do not meet the universal standard of Buddhist Wisdom practice, or bring its result.

Empty-emptiness has in it the realization that there is nothing real that *can* be grasped as I or mine. When the clear light nature of mind beyond ego has been revealed, it is the culmination of insight practice.

We don't just disappear when we realize annata or emptiness. Far from it. Instead, all our inner qualities are known and shine forth without impediment.

We may study teachings or have it pointed out to us by someone who's realized it, but seeing the nature of mind has the characteristic and function of all Buddhist wisdom practice. We're freed from ego-grasping and the afflictive emotions, having destroyed their basis, the fundamental avidya, ma-rigpa, or unawareness of our own nature.

Like a dream person waking up, in a single stroke, no self, shunyata, and Buddha Nature can be known.

*May all who connect with and take up Buddhist wisdom practice
have in their minds at all times
the realization that liberates from samsara*

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Notes from a Dharma Gypsy

On the historical and experiential development of Wisdom teachings in Buddhism

As I've traveled the last three decades between different Buddhist traditions, I've noticed a few things that may be of use to my fellow students, whether they practice in the framework of one tradition and lineage only, or whether they take up teachings that are appropriate to them from different schools of thought.

Criticism from the outside

I learned very early on that many teachers offer something of value for our lives and practice, and at the same time, there was often criticism of other approaches, methods and schools of thought. This can be good, if it is constructive, and informed. I found though that too often there was prejudice, and uninformed criticism that was limiting.

While some will identify with the path I've chosen, of learning from different teachings, I know there are others who will resist and say a person should stick to one tradition. A lot of people also feel that their approach alone is the "one true path to realization". Unfortunately, this limiting dogmatism has always been associated with religion and spiritual study.

To this group I have nothing to say, really, and while I admire the devotion of people who learn from just one teacher, it often becomes narrow, fanatical, and closed minded. They may attain good results for themselves, but as far as I'm concerned, more often than not, they miss when they criticize other paths and ways of practicing. Please see if what I am saying is true, or not.

For those who would learn from different traditions and lineages however, I would here like to offer a few of the thoughts that have helped me the most over the years.

I started visiting centers and going on retreat only after about a decade of study, and even then I would move between different methods of teaching and practice, and I noticed some interesting things. The first, as I mentioned, was that quite often teachers criticized other ways of understanding, and to my mind it was often uninformed criticism.

I also saw that people were at different stages of understanding the teachings I had been hearing and reading about, and practicing. This led me to the my first working idea that I've used as guidance when receiving different teachings, and that is that

Any teaching can be misunderstood

I point this one back at myself, first of all, asking if I'm understanding correctly. Am I practicing as they are setting it out for me? I add this on account of the scholar's tendency to try to understand things with the intellect alone, without practicing the teachings. This is all too common. Of course this often leads to mistakes, so I try to see when I have put the teachings into practice before having what I would call an informed opinion as to whether the teaching is a good one, or if it has been sold short, or is not complete in some way.

The Buddha taught that we should test out his teachings, to see if they really did lessen and uproot the causes of suffering in our lives, and in this world. This to me is the gold standard, the characteristic of a non-dogmatic Buddhist approach to study and realization.

This leads quite naturally to a second working principle I have when receiving different teachings, and that is, that

there are valid criticisms

This applies especially to the Wisdom teachings in Buddhism. If we know what these are, here in particular, we will be much less likely to fall into errors in our practice and realization.

Every approach to realization has its strengths and characteristic pitfalls, if they are not recognized and adjusted for, implicitly, through continued practice, or explicitly, in clear language.

To briefly describe the history of Buddhist Wisdom teachings, we can refer simply to a few key words.

1.

Two thousand five hundred years ago, the historical Buddha taught *anatta*, or non-self, and he did so in the context of the traditional Hindu teachings of his time. The idea in Hinduism is that there is the false ego, and there is the *Atma*, the Self that is in all beings. This can be misunderstood, however, and we can imagine and grasp a self where no self exists.

The Buddha is reported to have said,

"I have uncovered an ancient path",

which to me means that didn't invent the level of realization he attained, and taught others to know for themselves. It also affirms for me something that I've felt all along, that there are Sages, wise and holy people in all traditions. The question is always whether the teachings are being understood, and practiced properly.

The teachings on ego and Atma are meant to bring a person beyond the ego and suffering, but they often aren't understood that way, and so the Buddha taught an-atma, no self, to correct the attachment to the illusory self, and to anything less than who and what we are.

If we want to know the valid criticisms of any one historical era's wisdom teachings, we can either look at the subsequent traditions that developed, or we can see these adjustments coming from practice within the tradition itself.

That these lineages have in many cases continued to the present day means that they have often incorporated the justified criticism into their approach. It's also possible that, to some people's minds at least, they leave something out.

2.

In the first centuries after the historical Buddha, the non-self teachings were further elaborated on in the Prajna Paramita, or Perfection of Wisdom Sutras. These are sometimes referred to as the Second Turning of the Wheel of Dharma. The most famous of Prajna Paramita teachings today are known as the Heart Sutra, and the Diamond Sutra (the world's oldest printed book). In these teachings, the key term is *shunyata*, or *emptiness*.

This refers not only to the absence in reality of the personal self we manufacture and cling to, but also to the ideas we have of places, events, and objects we take as unitary, separate, and permanent. Ideally, the experience of the emptiness of these lead us to a dynamic realization of this fluid world, guided by compassion. These teachings, however, can be misunderstood as nihilistic. A person may think that emptiness means that nothing exists. As Thich Nhat Hanh said, "empty of what?"

The same word can have very meanings. For example, the word 'burn' means something very different to a chef, and a personal trainer (feel the burn, which is a good thing), and again to a photographer in the darkroom, where 'to burn' means to darken an area of a photograph.

The great saint of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, Nagarjuna, said that it is better to grasp a self where none exists than to misunderstand the teachings on emptiness, and then to deny cause and effect.

3.

Things appear differently from the way they exist. It's like how a mosaic that appears one way when seen from a distance, and is understood differently when we look more closely.

The Middle Way philosophy developed in the first centuries of the common era aims to counter misunderstanding by teaching emptiness as *dependent arising*. This means that things exist relatively, and so we have cause and effect, but we can be free from the grasping at a self that is the cause of samsara - endless wandering.

The Middle Way teachings also skillfully identify the root cause of samsara as *the gak-cha*, or *the refuting object*. It's clearly taught that the antidote to the very subtle mind that grasps the existence of a self is a very subtle mind that recognizes the emptiness, or actual non-existence of this. This is what we need to cultivate.

In the Middle Way teachings, the two ways we can misunderstand reality is to either reify, and grasp at a self where none exists, or to err in the other direction, and assert that nothing exists, which is the extreme of nihilism. We need the wisdom that sees accurately the way that things exist. Then we are free from samsara, and from a cold, mere detachment from the world, what they call 'the ghost cave' in Zen.

In each approach mentioned so far, there are ways of possibly misunderstanding the teachings. When it comes to the Middle Way, the method of analysis and resting the mind with what is found can be rendered ineffective. If people don't have a good deal of quiet meditation,

taming and concentrating their mind, there would be not enough strength of mind to *cut through the concrete concepts* we have. People study, and think, and debate, write books, and can speak eloquently about emptiness, but without realization based on combining calm abiding and special insight, such words are dry as bones. What's worse, their interpretations are prone to mistakes.

This should not just be a subject for scholars, which it often becomes. It's far too important for that.

Another potential mistake within the Middle Way approach is that it can stop at mere negation. There is a positive side to what is revealed through Wisdom practice, decreasing and removing the false ego.

As Arya Nagarjuna wrote, in *In Praise of the Dharmadhatu*:

*When a metal garment which has become stained with contaminations and is to be cleansed by fire, is put in fire, its stains are burned but it is not,
So, with regard to the mind of clear light which has the stains of desire and so forth,
its stains are burned by the fire of wisdom but its nature, clear light, is not.*

Our original nature is bright and clear, and filled with positive qualities, such as joy and ease. There we find kindness, gentleness, patience, generosity and compassion, existing in abundance, naturally.

Though we are practicing a path here that is aimed at removing illusion, we find there is more to us than we imagined.

In every case, we should check to see if teachings have the mistakes that are characteristic to them, or if our own understanding of them is complete.

4.

Two other approaches to liberation from the Tibetan Tradition use non conceptual wisdom. The first of these, known as the Great Perfection Teachings, or Dzogchen developed and was brought to Tibet by Padmasambhava in the late 8th, and early 9th century.

Bodhidharma brought what is today known as Chan to China in the 6th century, and these teachings have similar characteristics. One well known Zen teaching is this:

*A special transmission outside the scriptures;
No dependence on words and letters;
Direct pointing to the mind of man;
Seeing into one's nature and attaining Buddhahood*

In later centuries also in Tibet, the Mahamudra tradition developed, based on both the Middle way and Great Perfection teachings, and in practice also making use of non conceptual wisdom.

What these teachings have in common is the experience of *the nature of mind*.

The Great Perfection, Mahamudra and the intuitive Chan or Japanese Zen traditions use the method of resting in the nature of mind as it is, without complexity or analysis, knowing our nature directly, and freeing our mind from confusion and suffering.

Valid criticism:

There are characteristic sidetracks to this approach as well.

One is that a person may not have enough discriminating awareness functioning in his or her mindstream to cut the root of samsara, as taught by the Buddha, with this approach alone. I heard one teacher recommend to a student that she study the philosophical side of the teachings, to develop her sharp analytical awareness. Then she would be able access Right View, and benefit from the methods that use the wisdom beyond concepts.

When learning philosophy and wisdom teachings, a person can also neglect the qualitative aspects of the mind and perception.

One teaching I've found very useful here is on what they call '*the two obscurations*' - the obscuration of conceptual thought, and the qualitative obscurations, which are those that veil the mind due to negative emotions.

Quieting the mind, and deconstructing the false ego can be effective in removing the conceptual obscurations, but we still have to account for the quality of the mind we have when we practice meditation with the aim of developing wisdom.

The heart practices of loving kindness and compassion, gentleness, forgiveness, patience, generosity, humility, and joy, all brighten the mind. Then when we let go of concepts, our experience is rich, beautiful, free and clear.

One other possible sidetrack emerges here. We can have the experience of a clear mind, but it is possible that the cause of suffering is still there *as a seed*, or latent tendency, waiting for conditions to come together for it to manifest again. We should check up to see if this is so.

5.

*If people want to know
all Buddhas of all times,
they should contemplate the nature of the cosmos:
all is but mental construction.*

- From Eulogies in the Palace of Suyama Heaven, from chapter 20 of the Avatamsaka Sutra

What I call the Mind Only Schools, broadly speaking, introduce an essential concept here, and that is that

there are different levels to the mind

and that we all need to understand our mind well, to attain liberation from suffering, and enjoy freedom and peace. These teachings, also from the early centuries of the common era, include the Avatamsaka Sutra, as well as those on Buddhist psychology.

This one idea can counter the misunderstanding that can arise, of thinking that merely resting in a state of clarity is itself liberation, or as they term it in the Theravada 'the remainderless cessation' of ego-grasping suffering and its cause.

As with other traditions of teaching, here sometimes criticisms have made their way back to the instruction, or the ways of erring were realized from within the practice itself. For example, in the Mahamudra teachings offered by Lama Kong Ka (the fifteenth Karmapa's tutor), we have this, in the section called The Errors in Mahamudra Practice:

If one only cultivates 'Blissfulness,' 'Illumination,' and Non-distinction' without practicing 'penetrating-observation-into-the-mind,' it still cannot be considered as the correct Mahamudra practice.

Knowing that there are levels of mind, if we are wise, we will look to see if we have uprooted the source of suffering within, and not accept anything less than this.

A koan - practice question

A koan is the term in Zen for a question we use in meditation to reflect on, that can open up an experience.

When it comes to liberation, here is the question I would have us consider, referring to the wisdom that can cut the root of samsara:

*If wisdom is not found in concepts,
or in the mere absence of concepts,
then where is wisdom found?*

The teachings in the Mind Only School, and in Buddhist psychology say that there are different levels of mind that need to be worked with, and transformed. They say that we need *transformation at the base*, and not just on the surface.

I recognize now that each of the main Buddhist wisdom traditions developed within a period of a thousand or twelve hundred years, from 500 bc and the historical Buddha, to the later expressions of practice and realization, in 600 to 700 AD. There was overlap, and communication between the different schools of thought and practice, but what we have received down to today was essentially set forth in this time period.

6.

The Buddha Nature teachings are part of what are called the Third Turning of the Wheel of Dharma.

The Uttara Tantra, also titled The Peerless Continuum was written down by Asanga around 300 AD, and the ideas there are present in Zen, the Lotus and Avatamsaka schools, and they serve as the foundation for Tantra in Tibet.

The main idea is that

all beings have buddha nature, the potential for enlightenment

This is exactly the opposite of what we usually think of, when we hold an ordinary view of ourselves and others! This is *a positive counter* to wrong view. Having *pure perception*, we can't put ourselves or others down. Instead we have to become awake and clear about this, and help others have this realization.

Valid criticism:

If these teachings are misunderstood, or taken wrongly, we could fixate on a self out of this original nature, which is, in the language of the Diamond Sutra, 'ungraspable and non-deceptive'.

In the Vajrayana, we train then in seeing ourselves, and others, and this world as both divine in nature, and made of light, transparent, luminous, unobstructed, and able to receive and communicate with others. We call this a training, but it is actually familiarizing ourselves with the way things are already, in themselves. Eventually we learn to see this, and it directly counters wrong view.

I recall the Avatamsaka Sutra being described as how an enlightened person sees and experiences the world. It's method is quite different than that of analysis, or learning to experience the mind itself. Thich Nhat Hanh said, if you like poetry, you will enjoy the Avatamsaka Sutra. I think he was referring to all the sutras that use imagery, and story to communicate. They are born of, and transmit people's devotion, and insight.

He says, in the beginning of *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*:

"When we hear a Dharma talk or study a sutra, our only job is to remain open. Usually when we hear or read something new, we just compare it to our own ideas. If it is the same, we accept it and say that it is correct. If it is not, we say it is incorrect. In either case, we learn nothing. If we read or listen with an open mind and an open heart, the rain of the Dharma will penetrate the soil of our consciousness.

*"The gentle spring rain permeates the soil of my soul.
A seed has lain deeply in the earth for many years just smiles.*

"When reading or listening, don't work too hard. Be like the earth. When the rain comes, the earth only has to open herself up to the rain. Allow the rain of the Dharma to come in and penetrate the seeds that are buried deep in your consciousness.

"A teacher cannot give you the truth. The truth is already in you. You only need to open yourself - body, mind, and heart - so that his or her teachings will penetrate your own seeds of understanding and enlightenment. If you let the words enter you, the soil and the seeds will do the rest of the work."

This is a far different method of working with the mind towards liberation, maturing those elements within ourselves.

Valid points to consider:

The teachings on Buddhist psychology, the Nature of Mind teachings, sutras such as the Avatamsaka, presenting interdependence, and interbeing and the whole world as sacred can seem at times abstract, or like they are talking about another world. But look deeply. It should become clear that they are talking about *this* world, this very body and mind, these sentient beings, and this earth.

The ten dharma realms are not outside of a single thought, said the Venerable Hsuan Hua.

The Mahayana sutras can also be voluminous. What can we do? Do we need to read them all, and from cover to cover? If we try to do this, we will soon be lost. Instead we should enjoy the teachings, and receive their message.

I remember once offering to get the latest book of Rumi translations for a friend of mine. He told me it wasn't necessary, that... Rumi was Rumi.... I understood what he meant. As that poet and seer said, *What is found there is found here...* It's just like the ocean then, that everywhere has the same taste. How much do we need to know it, or to know the message of the Buddha's wisdom teachings?

Ultimately, it's up to each of us to decide what tradition or approach works for us. Spiritual teachings including Buddhism in general, and the Wisdom teachings in particular are meant to free the mind from confusion and suffering, and to help us to more effectively help others. If they do this for us, they are fulfilling their purpose.

People have such different characteristics and needs that there is no one religion, or school of thought or method that fits everyone, at every time. This should lead us to honor our differences, and respect other faiths, and practices. They could be doing for others what our own chosen path does

for us. There is a saying in Buddhism that:

Practicing correctly is your own responsibility.

We may feel pressure to conform when in a group, or to please friends, or even a teacher. But we have to be honest with ourselves, and each other, and take responsibility for our own development.

They refer in Zen to what they call 'a Way-seeking mind'. This is nothing other than our sincere desire for the truth, and freedom, and to be of service.

I thought of two other principles that can be helpful to us as we make our way. They are:

Be humble and respectful when receiving teachings

and

Maintain your critical faculties

I mention this first one because I have seen over the years, in spiritual traditions especially, how common the attitude of pride and superiority can be. When even subtle pride can block receiving any fresh insight, what to say about it when it is more obvious?

As the precepts for Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing say,

*Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth
Be ready to learn your whole life*

The idea that we should keep our critical faculties always also comes from watching how we can be when engaging with teachers and traditions. It can be beautiful to see the devotion of students, when their teacher is good,

and all the receptivity it fosters in them. When there is a deep connection to a teacher, it goes beyond words, and we are able to receive blessings and inspiration from them. It's only natural then that we would trust them, even when there's something we don't understand. When we disagree with them, we will give them the benefit of the doubt, and say to ourselves, well, I don't see it that way now, but they may be right... they've been right about so many other things... I should investigate...

This is well and good. A mistake is made however if we think devotion is all that is required of us on the path. If one person could gain wisdom for another, then our work would have been finished long ago, but it's not like that! When it comes to receiving teachings, even if they come from someone we respect, we should test it before deciding whether to accepting it as true, and useful to us. This is the way we learn for ourselves.

No teacher worth his or her salt would want a student to give up their discriminating wisdom. Some people may just want others to agree with them, to satisfy their ego, but those are not the kinds of teachers we need. The really fine teachers I have known all want their students to stand on their own two feet, and to flourish in their own understanding. This is what gives them the most joy. As Thay said, 'a good teacher is someone who helps give birth to the student's inner teacher'.

Respect for the teachings involves deep listening. We should know the context the ideas and practices come from, and in that way we can learn to use them in our own lives, right where we are now.

In closing I will refer here to what we translate as 'preliminary practices', but that are really much more accurately described as - all the practices and ways of living that are the foundation for learning. I remember one friend telling me how Zen came from a monastic setting, and that it was with that as its background that the teachings made sense, and were effective. Even if we are not monks or nuns living in a monastery, our day

by day practice can emulate the way of life of a contemplative. We can strive for simplicity and order, to live an ethical life, with discipline, and joy in the teachings we have received, and practice. Then we can understand from within what the teachings are about.

*May these few words,
spoken from my heart,
help us all to open to the truth*

From a letter- on wisdom and compassion

I just wanted to mention one thing you repeated in your short note- about what Goenka said about compassion developing naturally as a result of vipassana or insight- I think that, in all fairness, sometimes it happens like this, and sometimes not (otherwise all Arhats would be Bodhisattvas, and that's not yet the case).

Actually, this 'wisdom leading to compassion' is the approach in the Zen tradition, as well as in the Theravada, and also, to some extent, it is the approach taken by the lineages in Tibetan Buddhism that emphasize wisdom practice more first, on the way to a full, complete realization.

(Just a note here: The Tibetan word 'San-gye', 'Buddha', translates to 'completely purified- and fully developed', meaning that all faults have been removed (which is the cessation without remainder), and all positive qualities are brought forth, *actualized*.)

So, to get back to my point- if it is so that sometimes liberation, the freedom of mind, leads to the full development of love and compassion, and sometimes not, then why not? Why does it sometimes happen and sometimes not? This is so important for us to consider as individuals, and so important for our world, really.

And here's the best answer I can come up with so far- First, there are different temperaments, so that in any one system or approach one person will flourish fully, accomplishing all the different aspects of development, while another person may need other instruction, and to engage in other practices to achieve the same thing.

Then, I've found the following teaching very useful to explain what is happening in any case. In the Tibetan tradition, they speak of 'the two obscurations' that keep us from seeing the truth of what is here.

The first type is what they call the 'conceptual obscurations', or the

'obscurations of conceptual thought' (wrong views). These are corrected, or cleared away by samatha and vipassana- the quieting of the mind and cultivation of the strength of discernment- discriminating between the true and the false. The Theravada, Zen, and Tibetan traditions that practice non-conceptual meditation clear away this type of obscuration, the obscuration of conceptual thought, very effectively.

But what happens, quite often as it turns out, - it's the characteristic possible sidetrack to this approach- is that the other type of obscuration, called 'the obscuration of afflictive emotions' (kilesa nivvana) is not always fully removed. Sometimes I've been calling these 'the qualitative obscurations'. And the all too common result is that people end up with a partial experience of the view of emptiness, or egolessness, one with the wrong concepts cleared away- but it is a cold, dark, meaningless, nihilistic experience, one that is lacking in the sense of worth, of the beauty and richness of what is here.

The emotional obscurations are cleared away by the development of all the qualities that we associate with the good heart: the development of love and compassion, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, humility, honesty, gratitude, joy, generosity... These change the quality of the mind so that when the conceptual obscurations are removed as well, the experience is warm; the mind is bright, appreciative, and loving; and the feeling is one of richness, of the great value of life.

The no-self teachings of the Buddha are further expressed in the Prajnaparamita Sutras, and the Middle Way is a further explanation of those teachings. The term 'Middle Way' refers to 'being free of the two extremes', the extreme of eternalism (ego-grasping), and the extreme of nihilism. According to Middle Way philosophy, all the mistakes that people can have regarding the View fall into one of these two categories.

Right View is accomplished by removing the two obscurations, conceptual and emotional, together with their seeds. So the development of love and

the positive qualities of the heart are definitely an essential aspect of vipassana, or wisdom practice, seeing things fully as they actually are. Whether we arrive at this indirectly, or through our engaging in methods that directly cultivate both discernment and kindness, the need is there for everyone to have these elements present. That said, we should each practice what suits us best, and accomplishes a full result.

Metta and Wisdom

'Rally the concepts for the highest purpose of developing wisdom, whereby concepts themselves are transcended.' –

Venerable Nyananada

In Buddhism, the freedom from suffering, and the attainment of the highest happiness comes from the development of wisdom. So when we are practicing metta, loving kindness meditation, wishing ourselves or another well, it's only natural that we have in mind for them this freedom of mind. In that sense, a person practicing a spiritual path will have a different and more refined, idea of the enjoyments and peace they would share.

In Buddhism, Wisdom needs to be understood in two ways: there's the ordinary wisdom, that includes common sense, intelligence, memory and foresight. These are what we would call 'worldly wisdom'. Then there is what is known as *Transcendent Wisdom*, which means seeing through, or going beyond the mistaken ego-idea we hold of ourselves and others.

Why is this so important to know? In Buddhism, it's taught that all the afflictive emotions come from this ignorance: all the anger, fear, attachment, jealousy, pride, competitiveness, and so on.

Usually, when we're in the grip of a strong emotion, unless we're trained, or quick enough to catch what's going on, we don't see the ego-idea. Then, when things calm down a bit, we don't feel any urgency to look deeply into this. And so it goes, on and on...

If we learn to look, however, we can see the presence of ego grasping, right in the middle of the arising of a delusion, such as anger, or attachment, pride, or low self esteem.

This idea of ourselves or another that we take hold of seems permanent, unitary, and independent. That is illusory, and the source of our problems.

The way Lama Zopa Rinpoche expresses it,

*that I that appears to exist from its own side,
not merely labelled by the mind,
doesn't exist at all.*

See for yourself if this is so.

There's a Taoist story of a man in his small boat who sees another boat slowly coming towards him. He calls out, trying to warn the person in the other boat that he's headed right for his boat, but no one seems to hear. He shouts louder, and starts to cuss, and when the other small boat finally rams into his, he's outraged – ready to give the other boatman a piece of his mind... when... he sees there was no one in the other boat... and, just like that, his anger vanishes...

It's like this when we realize that the one we would get angry at is only our imagined idea of a person, or situation.

So much of what we do with our mind, in relation to others, is our own invention.

What can we do?

There's a line from the Seven Point Mind Training teaching that translates to, '*Wisdom is the greatest protection*'.

Of course, we can separate from negative actions and states of mind by ethical restraint – which quite literally can feel like we're holding ourselves back from doing something we want to do; {for example, like eating that cake, or speaking that harsh word}

and we can learn to pacify negative emotions through calming the mind in meditation, but this is also temporary – like Chagdud Tulku said, like pressing 'pause' on the tape player; but

it's only wisdom that ultimately uproots the cause of suffering.

The teachings say that this ego idea has been with us since beginningless time, but that it can be transcended, and suffering brought to an end, through the development of right understanding.

The Thai teacher, Ajaan Thate said,

'Mental phenomena will stop only when insight discerns its causal factors, and uproots their underlying causes.'

Now, this freedom from problems, and the attainment of the highest happiness is naturally what all wish for ourselves, and those we care for, and so, of course the question, or sticking point presents itself:

How can we wish happiness for ourselves or another if they don't exist as we imagine?

When this question comes up, it's something of a landmark, I think. It means we're trying to integrate these two aspects of the path, of love and wisdom, and something doesn't seem to fit. But this only means that we haven't yet taken the wisdom side far enough.

I'm sure other students besides myself have been relieved to find that there's a whole great body of teachings called The Perfection of Wisdom Sutras that are aimed at explaining this very point.

Being one of the earliest formulations of the Mahayana Teachings, they emphasize the ideal of compassion throughout this sacred literature, and, at the same time, they thoroughly explain the 'emptiness', or non-existence, of that imagined self that we reflexively produce, and project and hold onto as though it is what is actually there.

The Prajna Paramita Sutras help us to see through this notion, and learn to care for others in the best possible way.

Here are a few verses from the Perfection of Wisdom:

*'If you see the signless nature of the sign,
then you see the tathagata (that which is).'*

*'The skill in means of a Bodhisattva
consists in this,
that he cognizes a sign,
(or what seems to be a fixed characteristic,
that could be mistakenly equated with identity)
both its mark and cause,
and yet he surrenders himself completely
to the Signless realm of dharma,
in which no sign has ever arisen.'*

and,

*'one treats an actually non-existent objective support as a sign,
as an objective support.'*

The act of will

(of a bodhisattva, in truth, actually) arises only in reference to the conventional expressions current in the world.'

In case this seems in the least bit abstract, there are the later teachings on wisdom in Buddhism, that can help to clarify the meaning.

What our senses and concepts present to us, and what we then fixate on, is not what is actually there. We can learn *to see through* our imaginings, and in fact, out of compassion, this is something we need to learn to do.

This same thread of an idea, of acting with both wisdom and compassion is presented by the Eighth century saint, Shantideva, in his Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life, where he asks,

*'If no beings exist [in ultimate reality],
toward whom should we have compassion?*

and he answers:

*'To attain the result [of buddhahood,
which is to be achieved only
through the awakening of great compassion],
one should direct one's compassion
toward whatever it is that unenlightened beings call 'beings'.*

The modern day Tibetan teacher, Deshung Rinpoche, also taught on this same subject, when he said:

'On the conventional level of reality, beings do not exist as they are perceived by other unenlightened beings. The bodhisattva realizes that, in ultimate reality, there are no beings who exist as unenlightened beings think, but he directs his mind toward those beings as they perceive themselves.

'On the ultimate level, he sees no beings, but he realizes that on the conventional

level, beings think they exist and do experience suffering. Out of objectless compassion, therefore, he directs his mind toward them.'

Going back to the historical Buddha, in the last part of the Metta Sutta, there are the lines:

*'having attained Right Understanding,
one is no longer born into states of suffering'*

I take the inclusion of this idea at the end of his teaching on loving kindness to be an encouragement to us all, to get to the root causes of our dissatisfaction, and difficult emotions, and then to share this wisdom with all our loved ones, with all the world.

One more piece, for completeness' sake

Going beyond the ego idea we've held of ourselves doesn't lead to nothing, or non-existence, but to our true self, sometimes called our Buddha Nature, which is inherently perfect, and naturally rich with good qualities, such as love, intelligence, joy, and peace.

The Perfection of Wisdom Sutras say that all the Perfections are included in Wisdom, such as Generosity, and Ethics.

And later schools say that

*the nature of mind is intrinsically pure,
and only temporarily veiled
by obscurations*

*when these are cleared away,
our original nature shines forth,
just as the sun,
that has been parted from the clouds*

Metta leads to wisdom, wisdom leads to great love

One teacher, I've heard, referred to Maha Metta – or Great Love, and we can come to this in a number of ways.

One is through the development of what are called *The Four Immeasurables*, of Universal Love, Compassion, Joy, and Equanimity, it's peace and strength.

Though the wisdom aspect is not explicitly brought out in the loving kindness teachings alone, I think it is implied, or can be intuited. As one teacher in San Francisco, Lama Lodro Rinpoche explained, *having great love brings one right up to the view itself*.

Another way to arrive at the unity of Great Love and Wisdom understanding selflessness, as explained, is through the cultivation of liberating insight. By this, we arrive at the state of freedom, peace, and natural Great Love for all.

Wherever we are in our study and practice of the path, whatever our afflictions and needs at this time, we do need both of these factors, to some extent at least, for any path to function.

We need kindness towards ourselves, manifesting as self respect, and the wish to live well, and as ethics, if we are pursuing a path that leads to greater peace and freedom. We also need insight into causality, if we are to practice well, and actualize out intention. Ideally, we'll bring each factor to its fullest development, and share the fruits of our practice with all the world.

*I praise the Buddha,
and all Enlightened Teachers,
for their great liberating activity!*

Vipassana - The Prototype of Buddhist Wisdom

{the first expression}

Every tradition that teaches liberating wisdom has its origin in the Buddha's instruction and the Dharma that followed from that, known to us today as vipassana or insight meditation. To be valid as a Buddhist wisdom practice, whatever the method, it should be possessed of the same understanding, and result in the same freedom as was taught by the Founder.

I remember asking one Tibetan teacher here in San Francisco, about a verse in a Mahamudra text that says,

*The light arising from meditation
makes clear the nature of the mind,
exactly as it is*

I asked him, Is this light Mahamudra?, and he answered, If it is without ego, then it is Mahamudra.

Similarly, in the Avatamsaka Sutra there is the verse,

*To all internal and external worlds
Bodhisattvas have no attachment at all,
Yet do not abandon works beneficial to sentient beings;
The great ones cultivate this kind of knowledge...*

*Observing their essential nature,
They practice dedication reaching everywhere*

Since it is a precious heritage, invaluable as we make our way through wisdom practice, we should know what the Historical Buddha taught as wisdom. This is the common factor to all effective methods.

Ajahn Buddhadasa expressed the fundamental insight in this way, saying:

Nothing whatsoever should be grasped as I or mine

As Ajahn Pasanno said,

If there is any hint of self, a position is then taken and the whole realm of samsara unfolds.

And to make it clear, in the Annata-lakkana Sutta, The Discourse on the not self characteristic, the Buddha asked

Bhikkhus, is what is impermanent fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this is I, this is my self' "? —

"No, venerable sir."

and

Every form is to be seen as it actually is with right discernment as: 'This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.'

It is interesting that the Buddha pointed out impermanence here as a way to recognize self grasping that untrained, worldly people's minds all engage in. Universally, when we conceive of a self and take that to be who we are, and who others are, that self is thought of as fixed, permanent. This is the opposite of how form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness actually are, on close examination.

This method, of using the impermanent nature of composite phenomena to see annata or no self clearly has been practiced and passed down from the Buddha's time, right up to today.

We need a steady, calm and clear mind to recognize this, and in fact, the way things are in themselves becomes apparent all by itself, some would say, and their meeting point is this one insight, called *the no self characteristic*. All the effective lineages of the Buddha's teachings agree and converge on this one point.

All things are fundamentally without self nature. The direct perception of this is the nuclear essence of liberating wisdom.

Understanding what is taught in the Theravada is useful when reading or listening to talks from other lineages of Buddhist wisdom practice - such as the Prajna Paramita, Chan or Zen, The Middle Way, Mahamudra or the Great Perfection. This essential insight offered by the Buddha should be abundantly clear in every practice.

The Cause of Not Clinging

All of the Buddha's teachings were given for the sake of Wisdom

- Shantideva

It's not enough to just say, 'let go', or 'do not grasp at appearances of self', or even, 'nothing whatsoever should be clung to as I or mine'.

The great sage Ajaah Buddhadasa, in *The Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree* says,

The matter of I and mine, ego and selfishness is the single essential issue in Buddhism. The sense of I and mind is the one thing that should be purged completely.

Is this not a crucial matter?

and he then adds:

And it follows that in this principle lies the knowing, understanding, and practice of all the Buddha's teachings, without exception...

The first dispensation of the Historical Buddha's teachings, as they have come down to us, truly do point us in the direction of liberation. They tell us where to look, and how to apply our mind to find freedom from suffering.

The later teachings of those who realized the Buddha's intent then give us more complete language, and they can be a great help to those seeking truth. First, the Prajnaparamita Suttas go past just these aggregates as

empty of self and what belongs to a self, and say that *'all dharmas are marked with emptiness'*.

At this point, as Thich Nhat Hanh advises in his commentaries on the Heart Sutra, when we hear the word 'empty', we should ask, *'empty of what?'*

All things are fundamentally without the self nature we project and then take hold of. The direct perception of this is the nuclear essence of liberating wisdom.

Empty of self goes in the right direction, but *we can be more precise in our language, and in our investigations.*

The Middle Way of Nagarjuna and other Masters took up the task of giving language to exactly what we are looking for in our study. *They say that the self we conceive of can be recognized by clearly knowing the universal characteristics we attribute to the self:* We always see it as independent of causes and conditions, as unitary, as separate from the aggregates, and as permanent. Universally, this is so. Please see this for yourself.

For some early transmissions of the Wisdom teachings, the key to recognizing what the Middle Way philosophers later called 'the refuting object' was to directly perceive impermanence. This directly opposes that constant characteristic of any self view we may hold as someone or something as being fixed in nature. It's enough to show us our own concept and how it misses the mark of what is actually here.

Seeing and letting go happen at the same time

When it's dark out at night and we see a garden hose, we may see it as a snake, and experience fear and aggression. At dawn, we see it for what it is, and our fear vanishes. It's like this. That letting go, or not-clinging is a result of clear seeing, or vipassana.

If we don't know this, we may assume there is a self, or something to let go of, but actually, it's being undeluded, undeceived by appearances, and seeing through them that is the letting go the Buddha talked about as the key to freeing ourselves and helping others to do the same.

Self grasping, we should note, is not volitional. It is habitual and reflexive - being triggered in us in various, and especially acute ways at certain times. It's with us all until we are freed through wisdom, pervasive, and thoroughly integrated.

We may be accused of something, or praised and elated, or criticized, or threatened, and the sense of self will appear, and, if we are skillful, we can use these very opportunities to see through that fabrication, and be liberated from the consequences of wrong view that follow.

An interesting thing about the conceptual mind itself - its very nature is fixation. It's like a film camera taking stills, while life itself is dynamic, and always in motion. Whether we are talking about a person, or an object, or a place, or an event, the same hold true. When we conceive of something, and replace what is actually here with our thoughts or our ideas, we miss the reality in all its depth and richness.

Not seeing emptiness, or the lack of an independent self nature, we miss causality, our related-ness, and our potential. For an untrained mind, concepts often mask rather than merely indicate what is here.

The insight that enables us to let go of the ego is seeing clearly that what we would take hold of does not exist at all in the way that it appears.

When the mere appearance is seen through, and seen for what it is, it dissolves, and freedom from wrong view and the afflictive emotions remains. There is bliss. There is peace. There is light.

This is easier said than done, of course. We should all meditate enough to have a stable, calm and clear mind. Through this very calm abiding practice, or cultivating the factors of jhana, we develop the strength of discernment that can completely and consistently cut through appearances.

Is this not then a most important matter?

Three kinds of letting go

In each of the Traditional Buddhist Three Trainings for the sake of liberation, of Ethics, Meditation, and Wisdom, there is a different kind of letting go. The first two, we should know, are a means to an end, and the third happens through insight: With ethics we create greater calm and a sense of being at ease in ourselves; With meditation, we intentionally set aside the hindrances and further calm the mind, and on account of wisdom, as I've described it, the letting go is complete.

Not clinging to self in meditation, and post-meditation does not mean that, for those of us on the Path, the appearance of fixed selves will cease. From what I understand, that happens only much later. What we can do now is to see through them to the light within, to our profound nature, and our interdependence. Then naturally, ethics and helpfulness is here, along with the means to free ourselves and others from limiting views, and samsara, the suffering of unenlightened existence.

*May we all realize the Buddha's teachings in their entirety,
find freedom and ease,
and delight in the activity of sharing this peace and well being
with all the world,
all peoples, and all generations*

Uncommon Emptiness - The Emptiness of No-self

Common words often have more than one meaning, and need to be understood in context. For example, the word 'burn' means something completely different to a chef, a personal trainer, and a photographer. 'A run' is totally different for a printer, an athlete, or someone wearing stockings. Words that are used in Buddhism also have specific meanings that, if not understood, hold us back from realizing the purpose of the teachings.

There is no term more frequently misunderstood in Buddhism than that of emptiness. It's a term with such an easy reference in English that, even if it's not intended, the more frequented meanings resonate when we read or hear it spoken.

There are different ways to realize wisdom in the Buddhist sense, and in every approach we hear about we can ask, '*Is this liberating?*' If it is, then we can be sure we've arrived at Right View. If not, we can ask why not, and increase our understanding by that much.

One of the ways of going about freeing the mind as the Buddha taught is via analysis. This way is more gradual, and certain, as long as a person is able to make the transition from conceptual understanding to the direct perception of truth revealed through inquiry.

The other method for going beyond delusion and suffering is to see the nature or mind. This awakened state by itself can remove misperception and its traces.

Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche said

By residing in the free, brilliant awareness of our authentic nature, we chop down every habitual pattern and every bit of grasping instantly within its own natural state.

In both of these approaches there are potential sidetracks that have been experienced, and corrected, and reported on in Traditions by accomplished men and women. The possible pitfall in using the analytical method is that a person can remain attached to a mind made state. The characteristic shortcoming of the non conceptual approach happens when it does not counter self grasping ignorance, and is merely a thought free clarity. This appears to be Buddhist emptiness, when it is actually only the absence of thought.

One way to understand what is meant by emptiness in Buddhism is to see it as using a common word for the result of insight into no self.

The Buddha taught anatta, to counter self grasping ignorance. When investigate and see that the self we grasp is not there at all, in its place there is the experience of there being *an absence*. This is similar to any other absence we know, a room not having any chair in it, or a cup without water, which is empty as the word is commonly used, but it is significantly different from these emptinesses:

Seeing no self is the insight that liberates.

When our experience of the nature of mind is the result of insight that stops self grasping, there is freedom. Though at that point we no longer need discursive thought to uphold this non-attached spaciousness, we can be fully aware of the import of our experience. Non self is implied in Right Meditation on the Nature of Mind. Without this truth being fully experienced, the cause of suffering for ourselves and all beings may go quiet, but it is not being removed from our mindstream. We may even fool ourselves into thinking we're liberating ourselves, when all we're doing is resting in a clear and peaceful state where the cause of suffering is latent.

It doesn't take long to enter the experience of uncommon emptiness, as it's taught in Buddhism, once it's has been explained and understood. If we know its history, the right and wrong way the teaching can be taken up,

and briefly view anatta as the key insight that brings freedom, in the time it takes to blink once or twice, we can awaken this wisdom. We can then continue meditating comfortably, with the assurance that our practice contains all the elements to accomplish what the Buddhist teachings intend.

The parameters of what is negated by emptiness, or by wisdom practice in Buddhism has been made clear across the centuries, and it's up to each of us to understand it as well.

Right View in Buddhism is neither denying too much, or falling short of the key point of not grasping self ideas. When both the conceptual and emotional obscurations are cleared away, this one experience opens the way to recognizing impermanence, to peace and well being, to our innate richness, and to the sense of our fluid interconnectedness.

This emptiness then is refined in meaning. It is revealing, and it leads to realizing emancipating truth itself.

Jai-yoh!

*Long live the teachings explaining annata,
emptiness, shunyata,
the Middle way, and Great Perfection*

Key Points of the Great Middle Way

Over the last half of 2011 I've been listening to, reading, and reflecting on [Lama Zopa Rinpoche's teachings on the Middle Way](#), as contained in his Light On the Path series, (available online) and other of his books and recorded talks. Here are a few notes I've made on the distinctive features of Middle Way teachings.

The Middle Way is called that because it seeks to avoid the two extremes of eternalism and nihilism. Eternalism fabricates and then grasps onto or reifies the idea of a self, an object, or an action. Nihilism, on the other hand, errs by asserting that nothing exists, and therefore there is no reason to avoid negative actions and to practice what is right and good. Right practice avoids these two extremes.

With us all the time – the habit of ego grasping

Our grasping at the idea of self, that is the cause of suffering, is with us all the time. It doesn't have to be produced by an act of volition. Rather, it is *a deeply ingrained ignorance*, the result of unawareness, and having misapprehended things in the past. This will continue to be with us until we are realized, or accomplished in meditation.

We can say that the *imprint* left on our mental continuum lies dormant, is activated by contact, and is reinforced by deluded, egocentric action. This tragically binds us further to the continuation of samsaric suffering. It has been this way again and again for living beings, not only in this life, but throughout countless lifetimes.

Unless it is seen through, this habitual, reflexive ego grasping that is with us all the time, is being reinforced continually in the mind. For the ordinary person, without knowing it, these limitations are always being projected and repeatedly strengthened everywhere, throughout all aspects of experience.

For truth to be known comprehensively, and freedom attained, the very characteristic of mistaken consciousness needs to be seen

To uproot the ignorance that is the cause of suffering, it is not enough to just rest in a peaceful state, or in space-like equipoise, or in the clarity of the mind, useful, or even necessary as these meditations may be at times. Rather, the exact characteristic of this mistaken, self grasping consciousness has to be fully recognized and seen through.

Following the Buddhist teaching of realizing the Four Noble Truths, what is called in Tibetan 'gak-cha' or 'the refuting object' needs to be precisely seen: its **cause** is conditioned ignorance and the reinforcement of that; and its **consequence** is suffering. Then the discriminating **wisdom practice** that brings the dissolution of mistaken consciousnesses needs to be engaged in; and the **result** achieved – which is freedom at once from the whole range of self-created problems.

The result of analysis needs to be unified with deep, powerful, and wakeful calm abiding meditation, free of faults, over a sustained period of time

Ignorance exists in us, until removed, in gross, subtle, and very subtle forms. To remove the cause of suffering in its most subtle form, we need to generate a very subtle and thorough going, awake wisdom consciousness. Anything less than this would be just dealing with problems relatively on the surface, leaving the root cause of all our samsaric sufferings intact, to manifest again and again and again. Only when this wisdom that thoroughly understands the nature of experience is then applied on the

subtle innermost level, over a sustained period of time, long enough to transform the mind, can we ultimately cure all the sufferings of samsara.

Developing Wisdom has a 'global' effect

When thinking of 'an object' or of 'a self', or of an action, ordinary beings conceive of, project, and superimpose limited ideas onto things.

Recognizing the emptiness, or the ultimate non-existence of this, that it doesn't exist *at all* in what is there, in other words, seeing that this idea is a mere label, and how things are *in actuality*, has a global effect.

I borrow this term from how it is used in computer programs: there is a way to replace one term, hit a key, and have that term replaced throughout an entire document.

In a similar way, recognizing the non-existence, for instance, of a table, or a chariot, or an action, such as 'making soup' – recognizing that these terms are just concepts superimposed onto a collection of parts or actions – has the effect of seeing that same principle everywhere, and seeing through all of our projections everywhere at once. Each of the Middle Way reflections, if engaged in and entered into meditatively, can be universally freeing in this way. That is their purpose.

Cutting through the cause of suffering, even temporarily, removes all the afflictive emotions at once. To the extent that we have removed the cause of suffering through wisdom realization, to that extent we are free, healthy, and capable.

Going beyond ego grasping reveals things as they are, and enables us to live full and meaningful lives here in this world

Ego-grasping keeps us from seeing what is actually here. Since beginningless time, we have accumulated the habit of wrong views and the

obscuring effects of all the afflictive emotions. Cutting through ego grasping is radically different from this, and it reveals things as they truly are.

When brought together with the full complement of meditative practices of calm abiding and loving kindness, the practice of wisdom reveals at once our innate freedom, and our own and others' inherent richness. It reveals the preciousness of life; the insubstantial as insubstantial, the impermanent as impermanent, non-duality, and our interdependence with all of life. We become fully capable beings, naturally living responsible, caring lives, lives of both wisdom and compassion.

In *The Three Levels of Spiritual Perception*, Dshung Rinpoche quotes Shantideva as follows:

'If no beings exist [in ultimate reality], toward whom should we have compassion?

To attain the result [of buddhahood, which is to be achieved only through the awakening of great compassion], one should direct one's compassion toward whatever it is that unenlightened beings call 'beings'.

Dshung Rinpoche then adds: 'On the conventional level of reality, beings do not exist as they are perceived by other unenlightened beings. The bodhisattva realizes that, in ultimate reality, there are no beings who exist as unenlightened beings think, but he directs his mind toward those beings as they perceive themselves. On the ultimate level, he sees no beings, but he realizes that on the conventional level, beings think they exist and do experience suffering. Out of objectless compassion, therefore, he directs his mind toward them.'

The First Order of Business in the Middle Way Teachings: Clearing Away Wrong Views

For practical purposes, it's helpful to know that there are two distinct teachings offered in what has come down to us as The Middle Way. One is negation-only, while the other negates and then affirms some aspect of truth.

These each have different functions, and it can be helpful to know this - to clearly identify what kind of teaching we are reading or listening to, and see if it matches what we need at any particular time in our life. There is a reason for each, as we will see.

Perhaps someone hearing the teachings on *anatta* receive all they need from this, and they are liberated from self grasping and realize freedom and great compassion. Other teachings have come down to us, based on those very liberating insights of the Buddha. Why was this so? Why not just keep the language of the original teachings? One reason could be that the realized sages that followed the Buddha, out of their wisdom and compassion found and developed other ways to guide their students. At their best, they explain the meaning of the teachings with greater accuracy and precision.

In terms of the history of Buddhist wisdom teachings then, *anatta*, or no-self in the Pali Canon was followed by *the Prajna Paramita*, including the Heart Sutra and Diamond Sutra. These were then followed by *the Middle Way*, *Great Perfection*, *Mahamudra* and the teachings on *Buddha Nature*. Each subsequent teaching explains more clearly what came before, chronologically, and so, for example, the learning about the Middle Way and practicing according to those instructions makes what is taught in the Heart Sutra easier to understand, and to practice.

This *Middle Way*, in its two aspects, looks back, to the earlier Prajna Paramita and *anatta* teachings, and then, even in one discourse when it

begins to use affirmative language, speaking of clear light, spaciousness, freedom, and joy, it looks forward, to the subsequent teachings, of Mahamudra, Dzogchen and those on Buddha Nature, and the Vajrayana View, the basis of Buddhist Tantra.

Where am I? You are here. Prasangika / Svatantrika, Madhyamaka / Maha Madhyamaka, Rangtong / Shentong Madhyamaka

It helps to know there are different views within Traditions, and that each approach will order the teachings in their own way, stating their view as the pinnacle, encompassing and surpassing all others. These are matters of debate, and for the philosophically minded.

Practically speaking, I find it more useful to consider all these teachings in terms of their function:

Jamgon Kontrul said that the teachings that just negate, such as the Prasangika approach, are the best for removing wrong view, while those that negate and then affirm, speak of our true nature.

The teachers and lineages who would speak of both aspects, for the sake of clarity, sometimes distinguish Madhyamaka, from Maha Madhyamaka, Middle Way from the Great Middle Way, or Rangtong (empty of self) and Shentong Madhyamaka ('empty of other' or, as Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche expressed it, 'empty of the habitual negativities and obscurations that cloud the beauty of our inherent nature').

We do need both, it seems, and organically, in this sequence too.

If we were to try to affirm something about ourselves, without clearing away the residue and habit of our wrong views - what Lama Zopa said, as ordinary beings, we project onto everything, all the time, there will be conflict; the view will be obscured, or else we will reify those experiences, as we have so often in the past. To get beyond this tendency, and the even

the very subtle remainder of ego grasping, practicing the deconstruction through analysis of what we think of as self that is offered in the Middle Way is most effective. Then all that follows becomes clear.

At that point, the second aspect of the Middle Way teachings, affirming some aspect of truth can be taken up, with less danger of grasping, and making the same old samsaric mistakes of mind. These speak of non-duality, freedom, clear light, being unimpeded, and lead naturally to what's referred to as the Third Turning of the Wheel, on Buddha Nature.

Examples of Middle Way teaching

Lama Lodro Rinpoche taught the practice in this way:

Look from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet for whatever you are called by name, for 'I', 'me'...

{Investigate... look thoroughly...then,}

You can see it's not there. It's a concept....

When you don't find it, stop looking. You found it (the point of this meditation) already... stay with that...

Look one time each session, then, when you come to the point that you realize there's nothing there, then stay there. Don't analyze further...

Ringu Tulku expressed it like this:

The main method here is to cut through all your concepts, to cut through all your projections, so therefore, there is no affirmation.

If there is any statement, 'This is it' - then, with logic, through reason, you say, 'No'.

In this approach, it's seen that, whatever you say is a concept. So in this way, you let go, you cut off, you dissolve all your concepts...

And in the modern classic *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness*, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyatso says that, after analysis,

'We will confine ourselves to refuting all views, but not asserting any counter argument establishing any views of our own. This amounts to a complete destruction of all conceptual views of the nature of reality...

and,

The aim of the Prasangika is to silence completely the conceptual mind, allowing the mind to rest in absolute freedom from concepts...

This is the first delineated method of Middle Way practice, bringing the mind, via a precise and thoroughgoing analysis, to the point of 'a non-affirming negation'. *This insight should be well established first, before moving on to other meditations.*

This first aspect of Middle Way practice leads to the cessation of grasping and believing in, and taking to be true all concepts about ourselves, and others, objects, places, and events. We settle down. Then what is true is revealed. It is implicit. Going step by step, we can realize this.

If You Want to Know the Way Out, Seek Wisdom, and Not Emotion

The provisional and the definitive teachings each have a different function in freeing us, personally and collectively, from wrong views and suffering. If we don't know this, we may spend time and energy over the years, expecting a result from practicing one aspect alone, when our attention and energy can be more effectively used.

We get hints that the provisional teachings alone are not enough, for example, in the calm abiding or jhana teachings, where we are reminded that *we need wisdom to uproot the defilements*; and in the teachings on loving kindness, and the other Brahma Viharas, we're told that although we can attain very refined states through these practices, *we need insight to complete our practice*, both for our own sake, and for all those we care for.

As I understand it, the teaching on the Two Truths developed out of Middle Way, Madhyamaka thought, as a practical expression, and a further clear statement of those teachings. One of the things I admire about these particular teachings is that they aim to be inclusive of *all* states of mind, in all realms, from our various mistakes and their results, all the way to the pure, clear mind of wisdom, and freedom. They divide our experiences into *the relative*, and *the ultimate*, which I have defined for practical purposes as *that which is true, whether we see it or not*. This allows room to grow as we learn to see more deeply.

When it comes to practicing with the relative and ultimate truths, we have *the provisional* and *the definitive* teachings. The purpose of all the relative practices, I've seen, is to purify and transform *the qualitative aspect* of our mind and heart; and the purpose of the definitive teachings is to purify and transform *the conceptual aspect* of the mind, *and this* is what brings freedom.

As Shantideva said,

All of the teachings have been given for the sake of wisdom

If we depend on the provisional to accomplish what only the definitive can do, we will be disappointed. We will not realize our aim. At this point, we need wisdom, in the form of insight into our true nature.

We do need both the relative practices, and the definitive. They each have an essential role to play in our fulfillment, but they are different. The necessary relative practices, such as ethics, patience, meditation, generosity, the purification of faults, renunciation, faith and devotion, are also called *provisional* in the sense that they enable us to move from one place to another; they prepare the ground, they nurture and sustain us, just as our everyday provisions do, and they provide necessary the supporting conditions where wisdom-insight can arise and become strong.

To make the distinction, in Mipham's *Sword of Wisdom*, it says,

Whichever sutras (teachings and practices) are directed toward engaging the path are called provisional, and whichever sutras are directed towards engaging the result are called definitive.

In more detail, whichever sutras teach about the self, living beings, and a self where there is (in fact) not a self are called the provisional teaching;

And whichever sutras teach about emptiness, the signless, the wishless, and the absence of self - these teachings on the doors to liberation are called the definitive meaning.

There's a well known quote of Einstein where he says, *We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.*

And I found an exposition on this idea from Babaji Bob Kindler. He said,

You can't solve a problem created at one level with a solution that is also at that same level; you have to go to the next level and get the solution and then apply it back to the earlier level of the problem.

This is *exactly* what we should be aiming to do in Buddhism. If we don't, but instead get caught up in emotion, which feels right and does have some truth to it, the problems, and the suffering do not resolve. In every case, the freedom from suffering we seek comes from wisdom.

I heard this line back in the early 1990's that has stayed with me to these many years.

Back then, I was careful not to take initiations I was not ready for, especially when they involved commitments. I remember calling the hosts here in Northern California of Dzongsar Khentse Rinpoche, who was scheduled to give a Manjushri empowerment at Pema Osel Ling. I asked the person who answered the phone if he could ask Rinpoche if there was any commitment accompanying this initiation, and I could hear him in the background be asked and say, *'Is there a commitment? Yes, Seek wisdom, and not emotion'*, which the host then repeated to me.

Wisdom has a dispassionate quality to it that allows us to see more deeply than when we are stirred up, even with a righteous emotion, such as compassion, or devotion to a teacher or an ideal. By comparison, whether we like to hear it or not, that kind of mind stays on the surface. So much of what I see in our modern social political engagement is strong on emotion, but without the insight that can finally resolve these challenges, of racism, violence, greed and corruption.

The hard part to express about this is that we need more than emotion. There *is* truth to the wisdom of our feeling nature, and it *is* necessary to educate our emotions to the truth, but that is only the qualitative, the provisional, the relative, and not the complete right view, which has right the conceptual understanding, and gives the definitive answer.

We are naturally attached to what we know on some level is right, but we need to ask ourselves if our view is complete, and if we are achieving our aims, with just our passionate convictions. If we have not yet accomplished our goals, personally or collectively, we have to think more deeply about what could be missing, and this, for me is where the teachings on the Two Truths are invaluable.

In terms of practice, we need both the provisional and the definitive, working together towards our one end, of resolving suffering, personally, in our communities, and in our world. From the outside, they may seem to be contradictory, involving as they do self and no self, but when practiced, all this becomes clear.

Ani Tenzin Palmo said,

The ego (wrong view) dissolves naturally through deep insight into the nature of mind... until then it is the self, the ego that walks the path...

and in *The Buddha Within*, Shenpen Hookham says,

One cannot rely on the dualistic, deluded mind to undo its own delusions (which is using the same kind of mind that created the problems)

Finally, it is the non-deluded, noncompounded, nondual (knowledge of the) ultimate reality itself that has the real power to remove delusions...

This distinction, and the balance and harmony of the relative and the ultimate comprise the whole of the spiritual path.

We can fully understand these two aspects, and how to apply them most efficiently, guided by our noble spiritual friends.

{This series of articles concludes with an essay on the inseparability of the two truths.}

The Inseparability of the Two Truths

There is an easy way to recognize the inseparable nature of the relative and enduring truth. If we begin with enlightened activity, we can see their essential unity, plain as day.

There have been times for all of us, I'm sure, when we have given or received help and support *that happened spontaneously, creatively, and in a way that surely felt not-separate*. These are the very characteristics of enlightened activity- the compassionate motivation, together with the intelligence or wisdom responding to the needs of the moment.

Now, we can't say that the words spoken, or written, or the compassionate gestures were at all separate from this awakened nature we can find in our teachers and in ourselves- they are the expressions of this nature, like the rays of the sun.

As Suzuki Roshi said,

Strictly speaking, there are no enlightened people, there is only enlightened activity.

And as the Thai Forest Master, Ajahn Maha Boowa said,

For an enlightened being, there is no other response to the human condition, than compassion.

In the same way, the work that we do, and our everyday activities are not at all apart from the true, unchanging basis, the ground of our living.

What we call 'the relative' is just this nature rising to meet the needs of the time, and these expressions are not for a moment separate from the ultimate truth.

One way of thinking of the ultimate, or definitive truth is *the way things are, whether it is seen or not*. This gives us room to gradually learn, and it accommodates all the mistaken or partial beliefs a person can have in a larger view.

Seeing the unity of the two truths, the relative and the definitive is onward leading. We gradually learn to see more clearly and more fully.

Another term for the relative is *the provisional*, which I like because of its connotations - *provisions* are what enable us to get from one place to another. *They are all necessary*. They fulfill an essential function.

We may easily overlook what seems to be commonplace, the transient, the ephemeral, preferring the lasting, the sure and reliable, but this life of freedom and helpful activity is fully realized through the temporal.

The two truths, the relative and ultimate are known then to be essentially one. They are two aspects of one truth, that when well understood are of equal importance.

The Single All-Sufficient Method

*The Great Perfection Approach to Ending Suffering,
and Bringing Happiness to the World*

*Do no harmful actions,
Accomplish all that is good,
Purify your mind -
This is the teaching of the Buddha*

Ultimately, all of the Buddhist teachings are aimed at liberation. There are instructions that go directly to this point, of teaching freedom through insight, and those practices, such as calming the mind, and ethical ways of living, that support our freedom from suffering, and having the ability to benefit others in lasting ways.

The Wisdom teachings themselves can be further divided into those that cultivate insight by a gradual approach, using analysis first to get free from grasping at our concepts, and meditating on the result, and those that encourage us to directly experience the inherent freedom of the mind, which is our true nature. For those who can take this as the path to understanding and liberation, this way is quickest, the most direct.

While most Buddhist Wisdom teachings identify the cause of suffering as *self grasping ignorance*, the Great Perfection and Mahamudra lineages take it a step further and recognize *unawareness* (ma-rigpa, a-vidya) as the ground from which such self grasping emerges. It is the necessary basis they say, exactly like being asleep is the basis for dreaming. When someone is awake to our fundamental nature, that is open, boundless and clear, peaceful and joyful, by contrast, then *all of* the delusions that derive from any lesser view of ourselves are not created, and the remainder of those that have been produced are gradually and *completely* dissipated. Hearing this, who would not be intrigued?

Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche said:

By residing in the free, brilliant awareness of our authentic nature, we chop down every habitual pattern and every bit of grasping instantly within its own natural state.

Tulku Urgyen said:

Realizing the view, authentically and totally, melts away the obscurations of karma and disturbing emotions, and this allows the qualities of original wakefulness to unfold.

And Khen Rinpoche again:

The focus in meditation itself should be on the nature of the mind. This will reveal everything. Meditation on the true nature yields a lucid clarity and profound openness which is very mysterious. Abiding continuously in that state will cause beautiful qualities, such as compassion and wisdom, to arise and shine naturally.

In some ways, this is a distinct approach to developing our wisdom and manifesting our positive qualities. It is a path and practice, certainly, for those with interest and keen intelligence, and who have some amount of faith right from the beginning, and are willing to let the mind clarify and reveal itself, naturally, and effortlessly.

Ani Tenzin Palmo said

What all these meditations, Mahamudra and Dzogchen in particular are designed for, is to help us to recognize the nature of the mind. What everyone is aiming for, initially, is that breakthrough. In the Theravada system, it's called entering the stream, and in Zen it's called kensho. In Mahamudra and Dzogchen it's called seeing the nature of the mind.

So what we are trying to get first, is a direct recognition of the nature of the mind. My lama, Khamtrul Rinpoche, said that 'Once we realize the nature of the mind, then we can start to meditate', because the whole point is that once we've recognized what we're looking for, then we can start to open up that glimpse, (snaps fingers) and make it longer and longer...

The relative practices, we should know, come from this, and they also lead to the experience of more fully knowing our true nature.

In *The Beauty of Awakened Mind*, Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche says

Shamatha, bodhicitta, joy, and devotion are not separate from Dzogchen - they bring out the beautiful qualities that are inherent within our own enlightened minds. These practices soften our hearts, raise our energy, and increase our confidence and strength. When this happens we naturally open to the view of emptiness.

Of course, this is a challenge to talk about, since it's beyond anything we could say or think about it, without turning it into a static mental object. The key teaching in the Mahamudra and Great Perfection teaching therefore is to be aware of our experience, but without grasping or clinging to anything *at all*.

This experience is beyond conceptual thought. It is beyond ego, and delusion. It's like glimpsing the clear blue sky where before our usual experience was one of weather, clouds and storms, and grey overcast conditions.

For those who can take up this approach to wisdom practice, it's said that it is *the single all accomplishing method*, meaning that whatever kind of obscured mind or difficult emotions we have, such as anger, fear, sadness, craving, jealousy, or pride - this one practice can dispel them all. These are likened to different kinds of clouds, and the practice of resting in the bright and clear nature of mind is like the one sun that dispels them all.

In Rainbow Painting, Tulku Urgyen says:

Sometimes the term 'universally freed' is mentioned. In other words, it does not matter which emotion or thought takes place, all are freed by recognizing rigpa. 'Universally freed' means that everything is freed; it is not that only one type of emotion is liberated upon arising while the others are not. All the 84,000 types of disturbing emotions are liberated immediately in a single moment without the slightest remainder.

Seeing our fundamental nature, unchanging, and beyond birth and death, is seeing nirvana itself, the peace, purity and perfection that we and all others have with us at all times.

Garab Dorje's Three Words That Strike the Essential Point say:

*Recognize your true nature
Become decisive about its significance,
and,
Gain Confidence in Liberation...*

One name for this approach to resolving difficulties and attaining freedom is Dzogchen, or the Great Perfection. It is also called Maha-Ati, and is thought of in the Nyingma Lineage as the Pinnacle, containing all the other Buddhist vehicles and realizations in it. Refuge, and Guru Yoga, the Four Immeasurables, calm and insight, bodhicitta and the Six Perfections - *all these are included* in this one experience of knowing our own Buddha nature.

*May we all receive and practice the teachings
that bring us to the complete realization of our own true nature
and lead all others to that very same state!*

The Bridge Between the Old and New Schools in Tibetan Buddhism

{This is but my own modest understanding of how we got to where we are today, as far as the teachings different schools of Tibetan Buddhism. May I be tolerated by those with wisdom, for at least my aim is a good one.}

When Buddhism first came to Tibet in the 7th century, it brought with it a great wealth of healing and illuminating teachings. The wisdom practice that was transmitted then and that continues to this day in the Nyingma lineage was that of recognizing the nature of mind.

This has its exact parallel in the Zen teaching of Bodhidharma that is described as

*A special transmission outside of the scriptures
Not depending on words and letters
Directly pointing to the mind
Seeing into one's true nature and attaining Buddhahood.*

The 10th century master Tilopa gave this simple six-fold teaching to his student Naropa

*Don't think about the past
Don't think about what's going to happen in the future,
even a few minutes from now;
Don't ruminate about the present;*

*Don't analyze,
Don't meditate
Leave your mind in its natural state...*

Aah...

This is what has been and what continues to be transmitted to this day by in the Nyingma, non conceptual wisdom practice.

To give an example the contemporary teacher, Tulku Urgyen said:

“When we try to control the mind or hold on to an experience, we don’t see the innate perfection of the present moment.”

“Look out into the blue sky. Pure awareness is like space, boundless and open. It’s always here. You don’t have to make it up. All you have to do is rest in that.”

“Once you’ve recognised awareness, there’s nothing to do. You don’t have to meditate or try to change your mind in any way.”

“Although there’s nothing to do, you do need to familiarise yourself with this recognition...”

For the first few centuries after Buddhism’s arrival in the Land of Snows, this is the method that was taught and practiced to accomplish Wisdom.

The Nyingma and the Kaguyd school in its earlier transmission, via the Buddhist saints Saraha, and Tilopa, and their students and renowned teachers Marpa and Milarepa have a great deal in common, even to the point that their methods fit easily together when taught.

In what’s referred to as the second transmission of the Dharma to Tibet, there was a renewed emphasis on refuge, ethics, presenting the natural order of the stages of the path, and, when it came to wisdom practice, the use of analysis and discernment, joined with the strength of meditation to free the mind from suffering.

The earlier approach is that of non conceptual, direct perception of the nature of mind, whereas by comparison in the Kadam and Sakya they

make use of analysis and the cultivated strength of discernment to free the mind.

As far as method used to gain liberating insight then, the Kagyud tradition as it has come down to us today is a bridge between the old school, the Nyingma, and the new schools, the Gelug and Sakya lineages.

It was Milarepa's student, Gampopa, who brought together the teachings of the New transmission schools with the teachings on non conceptual wisdom practice.

He went on to teach Dusum Kyenmpa, the first Karmapa, and to establish the Kagyud as a distinct lineage of study, practice and accomplishment.

The way these two approaches are integrated

Over the centuries, every approach to Buddhist liberating wisdom has been tested, analyzed, and constructively criticized, so that, at their best, the traditions we receive are the refined expression of teachings we can use to establish ourselves in the state beyond suffering, as all the Buddhas intend.

When it comes to non-conceptual practice, the valid criticism is that it can be a state that is not free of ego grasping, not having seen through and fully removed the tendency that is the root cause of samsaric suffering. While it can be a complete teaching and practice for the right person at the right time to experience the nature of mind, too much is at stake here to leave it to chance, and so, absent the direct council of an accomplished teacher, it's to our advantage that more detailed teachings have come down to us.

The valid criticism of using analytical and placement meditation to go beyond ego grasping, on the other hand, is that it is a mentally constructed meditation, a fabrication that doesn't lead directly to the experience of our innate freedom, the natural state.

If others in the past and if we in this generation have not been attached, dogmatically to our views, then we will have been able to accept, accommodate and adjust for these valid criticisms. Accomplished teachers of all ages have done exactly this for us, fortunately, and we as their students, have received the benefit of their love, compassion, and intelligent, dedicated practice.

This is the way it developed in the Kagyud wisdom teachings known as Mahamudra. So that nothing is left out, and nothing is missed, both the method of analysis and resting in the nature of mind are employed, to gain the full result that ultimately the two approaches aim for. The two great teachings merged, to form one powerfully effective method.

One of my teachers here in San Francisco, Lama Lodro Rinpoche, is a modern representative of the Kagyud Tradition of liberation practice instructions. He taught as follows:

Look from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet for whatever you are called by name, for 'I', 'me'. You can see it's not there. It's a concept. This I is a concept, it does not exist, inherently. Me and I, they do not exist inherently, their nature is emptiness. Emptiness is the real thing, but through affliction, ego, that makes the difficulty.

Now look carefully to not finding 'I', 'me'. What is its location? What color? What shape? It has no location because it doesn't exist. Bring your mind to that stage. You can analyze, each time: is the I there or not? Is this concept, 'I', 'me' there or not? Is it artificial or truly existent? Is this a concept or really there?

Look one time each session, then, when you come to the point that you realize there's nothing there, then stay there. Don't analyze further. When you find and still you're looking, that's wrong. So first analyze, then just stay with that nature without bringing artificial thought. Bring your spacious nature of mind, and leave it that way, without any kind of thought. At a point, further analysis is only a distraction.

This emptiness is not a blank, forgetting everything, but this emptiness is very much aware, bright and shining...

We should all practice as necessary to attain the result for ourselves. Sometimes this will mean study and reflection, and at times the cultivation of calm abiding that enables us to go deeper and to more fully integrate what we learn. Sometimes it will mean letting go of all the thinking about what the teachings mean, and analyzing events, when that keeps us on the surface, and joyfully experiencing the true nature of mind more fully.

Connecting with one or more traditions, we have the advantage of learning from others' efforts. There is such a great need for wisdom in our lives and in our world, that I pray we will all benefit from the great compassion of our teachers.

*May we all accomplish what all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas intend for us,
freedom from every trace of confusion sorrow now and forever,
great peace and well being,
joy, comfort and ease...*

The Meeting Place of Two Beloved Buddhist Lineages

A prose poem

Having had the great good fortune
of meeting the Buddha's teachings on liberation,
and those from teachers that clarify the Doctrine,
Great Compassionate Ones all,

I have heard and seen
how the subtle cause,
ego grasping as an imprint,
remains and has the power to recreate
worlds of suffering

and that no matter how high one goes,
until this is utterly eradicated,
the potential remains,
the subtle seed of ignorance can expand and develop,
and it needs to be remedied,
purified

completely seen through,
seen for what it is and so removed

Now, how this is to be accomplished
has been a point of diversion among sages

like one mighty river branching into two,
for centuries, each accomplishing the Buddha's intention

liberating countless beings from the inconceivable miseries
of conditioned existence
in the six realms and bardo

One Great River proclaims:

*The root of samsara
is self grasping ignorance,
and its remedy is to see through
to its most subtle level -
the actual non existence of what is grasped*

*to remove it by recognizing, unmistakably,
the error,
becoming wise and liberated*

Another Great River emerges and powerfully proclaims,

*Realizing the nature of mind
completely removes wrong view and its effect*

*What was grasped -
self and other, object, event,
all this is seen through in an instant
of awakening to the way things are,
deeper than any concept*

*Free and open,
all paths of practice are contained in this one mind,
this one experience*

For centuries now, independently and from a distance,
removed from each other except to refute,
and state their own way to liberation,
these two cherished lineages of liberating practice
meet today in me

And my gratitude to all those who came before,

to all who practice now,
my thankfulness and wonder is without limit

Both approaches meet at the same point,
completely clearing away the cause of suffering
and its effect,
bringing happiness, health, joy and peace

May all beings receive in full
all that the compassionate Buddhas
and his accomplished followers intend

May all danger be pacified,
and every need perfectly fulfilled

May all beings have everything they need
to accomplish their spiritual path,
May we all honor each other and this earth
and may all beings benefit, without end

Faith, Devotion, and Blessings on the Path of Liberation

When studying different Buddhist Wisdom teachings, we can notice how they are the same, and also honor the unique qualities of each approach.

There are different ways to come to self knowledge, and to freedom from suffering. Some traditions rely heavily on critical thought to see through illusion. Study and debate, logic and the use of reasoning are the methods that lead to insight, revelation, and freedom from wrong views.

We can also have an experience of greater understanding and freedom through connecting deeply with an accomplished teacher. This is something that is not mentioned in most traditions.

Faith comes in a few different ways. First, there is the *intimation* of a greater truth, something in us that says, 'Yes, this is the way to go'.

This becomes *verified faith*, as we follow our intuition. Our trust in a teacher or a tradition proves itself. We become healthier, more at peace, open to others and responsive.

After this, and higher than these two is *unshakable faith*. Having this kind of trust calms and steadies the mind. It becomes more clear, and experiencing the nature of mind happens quite naturally.

This kind of faith and trust is a little more of a challenge to talk about, because we're reaching now to some of the deepest connections a person can make with another in their lifetime.

When we speak of devotion to a teacher, this is something that is well known in Indian spirituality, but less so here in the West.

When we meet a teacher, and there is a deep karmic connection, something can happen that is inexplicable to the rational mind. At this point in our history here in the West, there are already a good number of stories of highly intelligent, educated and independent people being overwhelmed by such a meeting; they spontaneously cry, their heart opens, and right away there is a love and a trust they could not have imagined only moments before.

When there is this kind of a connection between a holy being and a student, it is unmistakable, rare and precious. As Ringu Tulku said, in meeting the spiritual teacher, half the journey is already complete. We can have the experience of awakening and insight in a moment, directly.

This is not easy to talk about, and it's certainly not the path for everyone. In fact, the progressive path is still often recommended in the Mahamudra tradition, even for those who have had such a profound connection and experience. It is considered safer, with less possibility of steps being left out.

The upside of faith and devotion as a path should be spoken as well, and praised as it should be, for those who can take this path.

It's possible that connecting with the enlightened mind of a realized teacher communicates more in a brief time than through years of study. I can say, I have some small experience of this happening. It is mysterious, and tangible.

They say in some lineages that it's possible to meet the mind of a teacher through his writings, or by seeing a blessed statue- and Indian spirituality would add- through dream or vision in meditation - and although this sounds like it's speaking metaphorically, the truth of it is, *this can actually happen*.

This is something that can't be manipulated, or bought, or else I'm sure everyone would take this easier path. Step by step learning by comparison at times can feel laborious, fragmentary, and very very slow. This is more a path of learning by intuition, and through love.

Connecting with an enlightened teacher communicates blessings. The energy is purifying, healing, illuminating, enriching, and vivifying. It brings with it a feeling of safety, and a keen, heightened awareness.

Faith and devotion we can notice here are related. Faith is *an openness*, or we can say, a *receptivity*. Sometimes this comes after careful reflection, and sometimes it is just there - immediately, and beyond any amount of reason. It's amazing when this happens, and it is so unusual that it calls for our full attention. This is a kind of awakening in itself, with some part of ourselves knowing in a new way, and deeply trusting another.

Devotion comes soon after this, sensing the exceptional qualities of our teacher, as an enlightened being. These exceptional ones teach more by who they are than what they say. I have had the thought that *these are people I can learn from my entire life...* they are like looking up at the great Himalaya mountains, and seeing more and more...

Ringu Tulku describes devotion as *inspiration*, and, *an opening of the heart*.

As I mentioned, this is not at all the usual way of talking about learning, or about liberating realization, especially here in the West. It's not usually talked about in Zen or in the Theravada, although there is faith and devotion in those traditions as well. It's not spoken of in this way very much, at least from what I've heard, in the wisdom teachings as presented in the Gelugpa lineage either. Each approach has its own special strengths. They all work, and can be taken on their own terms.

When it comes to liberation, it's in the Mahamudra and Great Perfection traditions that we hear of the great qualities of devotion.

Here are a few teachers speaking about this profound quality:

Simply by receiving the blessing of the lineage, we can automatically develop a meditative state even if we have had no meditation practice previously.

- Thangu Rinpoche

When we think with devotion of a past great teacher who has great wisdom and compassion, his or her qualities will be transmitted to our minds through the power of the unbroken lineage.

- Garchen Rinpoche

If one just focuses on devotion one does not need to spend years studying debate, philosophy, grammar, art and so forth. In the past, thousands of practitioners attained accomplishment through the path of devotion combined with the paths of Mahamudra and Dzogchen.

- Tulku Urgyen

and,

Mahamudra meditation develops strongly in a state of devotion.

- Ringu Tulku

Devotion is such a unique and precious human quality. With devotion, the mind is vividly awake, enthusiastic, and present. This is a kind of love, one that acts like a magnet for the blessings we receive from our teacher and the lineage, of inspiration, light and strength, and joy.

The closest we can come to describe devotion to a spiritual teacher, for someone who has not yet had such an experience is to say that it's

something like being in love. The object of our affection is in our heart continually, shining there, bringing us joy. We cherish this connection.

It can be like this with a Noble Spiritual Friend, believe it or not, and it's possible that the connection goes even deeper. They open us to depths we didn't know we had.

A realized being, a Buddha, shows us something no ordinary relationship can ever give, and that is the way to liberation from the entirety of samsara. They themselves embody this inner freedom, peace and joy, and that is precious beyond measure. It's greater than anything else in the world. When we have doubts about the teachings, or about our own capacities, we need only think of them. They show us directly what is possible as human beings.

Since it's good for us to know and respect all valid spiritual paths, I've written these few celebratory words.

*May we all realize complete freedom,
and lead all others, without a single exception
to that very same state!*

An introduction to these writings on Zen

I.

It seems fitting that I would be writing about Zen last for this collection of essays. Among all the different Buddhist Wisdom Traditions, Ch'an or Zen is the one with the most diverse expressions, ranging from the most simple to endless commentary. Where does one begin? or, having begun, how do we continue without losing track of the essential point? As with the other essays in this work, I would like to point out how Ch'an and Zen teachings can be used to accomplish our aims of finding freedom from suffering, and the ability to help others.

For me, the Zen tradition as it exists now in the West embodies all that can go wrong when engaging the wisdom traditions, as well as all that is worthy, and of incomparable value in them. Delineating this path of practice then is especially needed. I've held off until now because of the difficulty of speaking cohesively about such a large topic, but I feel that at least this much I can do: I can relate it's strengths and weaknesses to the other Traditions I know, and speak to what works for me, as far as this being a Buddhist path.

II.

In a recent letter, a friend of mine reminded me of the famous Samye debate between Han Shang and Kamashila, and what it represents. I've written a little about it, not just as history, but as referring to these two ways that wisdom can function in us. Ideally, they compliment each other, but historically, and in our own lives and practice, it hasn't always happened like this. Still I hold up the ideal.

In writing lately about Zen - as the last in a series of writings on Buddhist Wisdom practice, and I come to it now after having studied in the Tibetan

Tradition, which includes both approaches - analysis and inquiry, debate and reason, and also the non conceptual. It's not often that one person utilizes the strengths of both, but it does happen, as with Khenpo Tsultrim Gyatso, and Thrangu Rinpoche, who teach Mahamudra, and Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche.

Talking about or writing about Ch'an and Zen after all these years, it's tempting to look at those traditions and teachings through the lens of someone who's studied different views, but I also want to take those lineages on their own terms, and write about that too, at their worst and at their best.

III.

I had one friend who was steeped in Zen who told me two things I remember to this day about these teachings:

1. that they come from a monastic culture, and can only be understood in that context;

and,

2. that ideally, zen is self-correcting

I can easily line up the virtues of Zen with the Tibetan non-conceptual practices of Mahamudra and Dzogchen, or the Great Perfection. Being more thoroughly versed in those lineages, I can also offer something from their perspective on the potential mistakes people can make in Zen.

IV.

To fill this in a bit with my own history of involvement with Zen here in San Francisco:

I first started going to the Zen Center in the 1980's, and my experience of it then was that it was rather cold, emotionally. People wouldn't look you in the eye, or engage in any way. The teachings also I found abstract, and unnecessarily vague. For someone looking to Buddhism for a way out of suffering, by understanding its causes and cultivating its remedy, I wouldn't recommend this as a starting place.

I met one woman who told me she had been meditating for years at the Zen Center, without any improvement. I thought back then that the teachers were to blame for this, more than she was. They should have known better. As I remember it, they do not teach basic meditation in any kind of effective way, at least as I encountered it there.

They have a saying there 'Practicing correctly is your own responsibility', and I take that to mean that if we are going to practice sitting meditation, we should know how to do it, so that our time is well spent. There are now plenty of teachings available on both developing the qualities of jhana, from the Theravada, and on shinay, or calm abiding from the Tibetan Lineages. It seems to me that at least this much should be common knowledge at any Buddhist Center.

V.

I've come up with four guidelines that quickly sort out all that's taught in Zen. Others may navigate it in any way that's helpful for them, but these are simple questions a person can ask to assess what is being taught:

1. Is this Buddhism?

Another way of asking would be 'Is Zen Buddhism?', and by this I mean, is it grounded in the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path?

Buddhism is essentially about ending suffering, and the Dharma practice should reduce and eventually remove the afflictive emotions, anger, the

attachment to sense pleasures, jealousy, and pride. If it doesn't do this, it may be many things, but to me it is not Buddhism.

One of the ways Zen has gotten off track here, is that quite often it is not based on ethics, so you have alcoholics, or sexual predators not only wearing robes, but actually leading Zen communities. It's so common to find the accusation of nihilism leveled at Zen in America that most books need to address the issues raised by their failure at something as basic as this.

There are warnings about separating ethics from the View in the Great Perfection teachings, where they say

*Ascend with the View,
while descending with the Conduct
These should be practiced as a unity*

and

*Although my View is as vast as the sky,
my attention to cause and effect is as fine as barley flour...*

2. A second question I ask when assessing any Zen talk or text is

Is this a Mahayana teaching?

As I mentioned, my early experiences at the Zen Center, and at Green Gulch Farm in Marin left a lot to be desired when it came the the emotional quality felt when interacting with the students and teachers there. It has changed since the 1980's but the point stands. What should be a welcoming place, one where a person feels cared for can instead be somewhat barren.

Although they regularly chant the Four Bodhisattva Vows:

*Beings are numberless,
 I vow to save them
 Delusions are inexhaustible,
 I vow to end them
 Dharma gates are limitless,
 I vow to enter them
 The Buddha's Way is unsurpassable,
 I vow to become it*

- it wasn't until meeting teachers from the Tibetan Tradition that I felt like I could sense that the Mahayana was all about.

I remember going to meet Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche, and being so warmly received by him, it was like I was a long lost family member. By comparison, people would answer the door at the local Zen Center, not even look you in the eye, and then turn and walk away. After meeting this precious teacher, I remember I was so excited that I went to work and told my Zen friend that I has just experienced 'the Zen Center door greeting of the future'! They are not there yet, but perhaps in time...

The Mahayana is based on what we all know and recognize as basic human kindness and warmth, and it reaches from all of our everyday connections with family and friends, co workers and those we meet throughout the day, to everyone we don't see as well. If this Mahayana quality is missing, when we practice any Wisdom teaching, the result is something other than it can be, and something other than it is meant to be.

Love and compassion, joy, and steadfastness improve the quality of the mind and heart that experiences the world, and then when we enter states of quiet meditation with this kind of mind, the result is *very* different. It is one of light, of true seeing, and connection with others, our family, all species, and all the world. By comparison, without enough loving kindness present, the result is cold, detached, indifferent, an experience warned about again and again in Buddhist teachings. Let that advice be heard then.

In Mahayana Buddhism, we really do need the heart qualities to be awakened and developed to get a true result from wisdom practice.

I add this to assessing Zen study:

3. Is a fruitful meditation taught and practiced?

I give the Zen communities credit for emphasizing sitting meditation. Whether that time is well spent though depends on what a person is doing. It's a bad sign when you hear people sleeping in the zendo - that is what we call 'the extreme of gross dullness', and it's certainly not meditation. When done correctly, meditation should lead to more clarity, peace, and insight, so teachers have a great responsibility here, to see that at least this much is understood.

and, the last question I ask myself regarding Zen teaching and practice is

4. Is liberating wisdom taught and practiced?

Describing what accomplishes freedom of mind in Buddhism is not difficult. It should not take more than a few minutes to explain the essential points. When this is not done, however, and instead teachings like those on anatta, or emptiness in the precise Buddhist sense of the term are misunderstood, then the result of any practice is bound to be far less than it could be. This is perhaps the greatest loss. For people to come all this way, to have faith in the Dharma, and teachers, and to make time for sitting practice, and then to not have the way to liberation made clear - I can think of nothing that has moved me as much as this to work on this collection.

My plan is now to review some of my favorite Zen teachings, highlighting what they do exceptionally well in terms of their being liberating. It's only after I've said this much that I feel I can now go forward.

A Through-line for Zen Study and Practice

One way of thinking of the Buddha is that he was a reformer of Indian spirituality. He saw the limitations of how people of his time were practicing, and he introduced new language and insights to guide them to freedom. His gifts continue to be received, and new ways of talking about practicing his teachings have evolved, and they will continue to do so.

Ch'an or Zen at its best continues this original character of Buddhist teaching as being a necessary corrective.

The Flower Sermon

In what's come down to us as the very first Zen discourse, it's said that Shakyamuni held up a flower in front of the assembly, and that only Mahakashyapa understood what he was doing, and smiled. While everyone else was thinking of what the deep philosophical meaning could be, there was this immediacy of experience that was being indicated. When telling this story, Thich Nhat Hanh said, *When someone shows you a flower, well, it means they want you to see the flower.* The Buddha is reported to have said, 'I have a treasure of insight that I have transmitted to Mahakashyapa'.

How Bodhidharma continued the Buddha's teaching

Buddhism went to China in the first century of our common era. There it met and merged with Confucianism and Taoism, to produce something unique to Chinese culture and the character of the people there. By the time Bodhidharma arrived in the 5th or 6th century, there were layers upon layers that had been added to the essential teachings of the Buddha, on liberation and enlightenment. Bodhidharma's response was to withdraw from the Buddhist scene of the time, and sit in meditation, demonstrating what is essential.

The teaching he communicated is expressed in this way:

*A special transmission outside the scriptures
No dependence on words and letters
Directly pointing to the mind
and attaining enlightenment*

Thich Nhat Hanh offered this translation and commentary:

After the transmission had been handed down to Bodhidharma, he came to China and recited a gatha of four lines which was to become the guideline of the Meditation school in China. The meaning of the gatha is:

*You do not attain the meaning of the teachings through words,
since it is not transmitted from outside your mind.
The transmission goes directly from the heart of someone when they are able to see
the true nature and become Buddha (awake)*

*The meaning of this is that the truth or reality cannot be described in words or
sutras; the teachings are just the raft taking us across the river or the finger
pointing at the moon.*

*To practice meditation is to point directly to the mind,
and when you see the true nature you are awakened,
will attain the Buddha nature, and become Buddha.*

We can only imagine how upsetting this was to scholars, and to those who believed a person has to study for years to gain insight and to free themselves from suffering! And yet, this is what Zen at its best encourages us to prove for ourselves.

When I met one of my Tibetan Buddhist teachers for the first time, he said, very much in this same spirit as Zen, that, *A scholar dies with a pile of books on his chest, when all you need is one verse to get enlightened...*

Academic titles, official recognition, being knowledgeable and able to speak or write extensively mean nothing when it comes to finding freedom. Not only are they *not* a requisite, but they often get in the way.

What Thich Nhat Hanh said is true:

Buddhist teachers of the past have shown us Dharma doors, skillful means to help us find a way out of suffering, but if we don't understand these well-intentioned teachings, we maybe caught in them, in words and ideas, and then these teachings can become a hindrance...

This is where Zen practice at it's best, as a necessary corrective to over intellectualism, pride and ego are so valuable. If our study of this great tradition does nothing else, it's a treasure for this reason alone.

Unfortunately, what we often see these days when we walk into almost any Zen teaching community or bookstore, is that this original impulse, or what I take to be 'the through-line of Zen' is covered over. It gets lost in the profusion of obscure koans, or poetry, in the criticism one school has for another, in misunderstanding profound teachings, or in watering down Buddhism.

Just sit, then, and awaken to your original virtue...

Most of what we know in the US of Zen comes from the Japanese lineages. It's in Chinese Zen, or Ch'an though that I can sense again the through line, this vital connection to the historical Buddha's radical teaching on freedom from suffering, and bringing peace and health to our lives.

Twentieth century Ch'an master Xu Yun said

The goal of investigating Chan is to understand the mind and see the true nature. That is, to remove all the defilements in our minds and to actually see the image of our self-nature.

Defilements refer to false thoughts and attachments, while the self-nature refers to our inherent wisdom and virtue, which is identical to that of all Buddhas...

The Tibetan saint, Shantideva, in his classic *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, said that

All of the divisions of the Buddha's teachings were given for the sake of wisdom

That being the case, wisdom should be highlighted, brought to the fore, extolled and encouraged at every turn. Zen's focus is just this.

In his talk titled 'Put everything down, Let no thought arise', Xu Yun continues

..the first step in investigating Chan is to eliminate false thoughts. How can false thoughts be eliminated? Shakymuni Buddha taught much on this subject. His simplest and most direct teaching is the word stop, from the expression "Stopping is bodhi."

this means, making everything still... putting everything down...

There is a teaching about this retold by Thich Nhat Hanh, in his book *Zen Keys*:

One day Hsiang Yen said to his disciples, 'A man is suspended by his teeth from a high branch, his hands and feet not holding on to anything. Another man, at the foot of the tree asks him, 'Why did Bodhidharma come from India to China?' If our man opens his mouth to speak, he will fall and crush himself on the earth below. What must he do?...

In Zen, there is great faith in our original nature, also called our Buddha nature. Sometimes, when I hear the instructions of 'just sit', I remind myself that this is what is being emphasized - our own innate ability to become clear, and to understand ourselves deeply. For some, this is enough to find freedom of mind. For others, like myself, some more guidance is necessary, to support the unfolding of liberating insight.

As with the approaches to wisdom through non-conceptual meditation in the Tibetan tradition, in Mahamudra and Dzogchen, the insight and resulting freedom from Zen practice should be equal to that found through vipassana, or the Middle Way, inquiry or analysis.

As the mind becomes clear, we understand ourselves more and more deeply, and this is where practice gets really interesting, and delightful. We are transformed by our understanding, and it aligns with all that the Buddha taught.

What they call the self nature in Ch'an, in Mahamudra and the Great Perfection they call the Nature of Mind. Lama Lodro says, *this true nature is without ego, and without afflictions...*

The Zen practice of putting everything down and letting not one thought arise, pares us back to what is essential. It is our gesture of faith in the Buddha nature we all have.

Bhante Gunaratana describes what is called *papanca*, or 'conceptual proliferation' as 'any thought that delays your attainment of enlightenment'. The Zen practice of just sitting is ideal for those who think too much - it can be just the right practice.

There's a part of the calm abiding teachings they call the remedy to over application, that is contentment and non application when we have enough to practice with - enough presence of mind, and energy, understanding,

faith, and patience. If we allow them to, experiences in meditation unfold naturally.

Chan / Zen points out how, by itself, ritual alone is not it, or books, or speculation, thinking about the past, or looking forward to something in the future. It is present centered practice, with faith, letting go of everything that is not essential.

Lin-Chi said

Whenever wrong thinking does not arise, there is liberation.

and Xu Yun's disciple, the Ch'an Master Hsuan Hua, continued his tradition of teaching, saying

When not one single thought arises, one's inherent wisdom manifests...

This is why he called Ch'an *The Essence of All Buddhas*.

It Takes a Poet to Reveal a Poet

Thich Nhat Hanh and the Koan Tradition

Perhaps Rumi could explain Hafiz, and Pablo Neruda, Walt Whitman, but anyone else would not do them justice. It would be like trying to carry an ocean in a teacup - true, it's water, but it doesn't begin to convey its depth.

Translating Buddhist teachings, and the methods used to inspire awakening are like this. If you're not seeing as they do, and if you're not able to express it without losing anything, then what we get is something other, something reduced so much that it can't really be said to communicate the essence of the teaching.

Thich Nhat Hahn is a poet, and so when he speaks of poetry, he does so in an elegant and profound way. His book *Zen Keys* offers insight into the Koan Tradition, based on his deep familiarity with the Chinese and Vietnamese Buddhist literary traditions, and also with the awakening that comes from practicing according the Pali Suttas and the Agamas, the early Chinese translations of the Buddha's teachings. As such, he can move gracefully around the fundamental teachings, and point out where they succeed or fail to have the desired effect for a student-disciple. Is this not a great matter?

That is unusual also in that he can explain what is intended in Zen in both poetic way, and in a way that is clear to our rational side as well. I find this refreshing.

A Zen master uses words and concepts like everyone else, but he is neither conditioned nor captivated by these words or concepts. The language of Zen always aims at destroying the habit-energies of those who only know how to think conceptually. It tends to provoke crises, whose function it is to bring to fruition the precious moments of awakening.

Although koans are sometimes studied systematically from a collection, and there may be some value in that for a student, originally these were stories of unique interactions. If we can glimpse the principle at work though, we may be able to have the same insight arise as the disciple in the story. A lot of it depends on our karma, or readiness to hear that teaching.

When a former kung-an - that is to say a kung-an already proposed to another person - is recounted to us, it can sometimes happen that we reach enlightenment ourselves; all that is necessary is that the kung-an is suitable to our mind... in any case, it is necessary to allow the kung-an to act and not to make efforts at deduction and reason in order to find a conceptual significance...

He recounts this famous koan:

A monk asks Zen master Chao-Chou: What was Bodhidharma's intention in coming to China?

Chao-Chou: Look at the cypress in the courtyard.

To me, this is very enjoyable. And it has a quality I've not been able to say only because although it is clear and tangible, it's not easy to express. It also is something I've come to appreciate in Zen at its best: the immediacy and grounded quality, resisting intellectual speculation, or metaphysics. What could be more direct, after all, and inviting? It's not looking to the past, or the future, but to this living present, in all its fullness. We can talk about it if we like, but being awake to our experience is the point.

Thay says evocatively

A kung-an is only a kung-an when it is ours... the cypress of the disciple of Chao Chou is not my cypress. I must make the cypress mine...

Do you see it? If you see the cypress clearly, the kung-an is a success. Whether it is a cypress, a lemon tree, a river, or a willow is of no importance. It can be a cloud, a

river, or even this hand that I put on the table. If you see it, the kung-an is a success...

He also told the story from the Vietnamese tradition:

A monk asked What is the use of an old kung-an?, and Dien Ngu replied, each time it is retold, it becomes new.

I take all these teaching stories then as invitations. If we hear them, and have some experience of seeing what they point to, it's delightful, and there is no way to measure the benefit in that moment, and the result that can follow if we're able to keep that wisdom.

Here is another to the point koan:

One day a monk asked Chao-Chou to speak to him about Zen.

Chao-Chou asked, 'Have you eaten your breakfast?'

The monk answered, 'Yes, master, I have eaten my breakfast.'

Chao-Chou said, 'Then go and wash your bowl.'

and Thay comments:

These words contain no secret meaning to explore or explain. They are a simple, direct, and clear declaration... It refers to a very concrete fact.

This 'cypress tree' and the bowl are - wherever we are. If we understand these teachings, then we get the benefit right away, and we can keep this our whole lives. This is made clear in the following.

In *The Path to Bodhidharma*, Shodo Harada Roshi tells the beautifully poetic story of *Sogen's One Drop of Water*.

One day, the abbot was about to take a bath, and the water became overheated. He called his attendant and asked him to bring to cool water,

which he did. After getting the water just right though, he just threw what was left in the bucket to one side. This set off the Abbot, and he scolded his student, saying

'At the moment you did that you were only thinking of that as just a little bit of water and were therefore carelessly throwing it away, weren't you? Why didn't you go just one step further, especially knowing that this is the time of the year when there's never enough rain? Why didn't you put it on the garden's trees or flowers? If you had put it on the tree it would have become the very life of that tree! If you had put it on the flowers, it would have become the very life of the flowers and lived on. Why do you begrudge such a small effort as that?'

With these scathing words he severely reprimanded his disciple. Continuing, he said, 'In even one drop of water, no matter how tiny a drop, the water's great value doesn't change at all! If you can't understand this value of one single drop of water, no matter how hard you train you'll never become someone who can give life to that training.'

His student took these words to heart, and practiced according to that insight. He even changed his name to Tekisui, which means 'one drop of water'.

Harada Roshi comments:

At (the monastery of) Sogenji, Tekisui was taught the value of one drop of water and, although he used its teaching throughout his life of seventy-four years, it was never exhausted. This teaching, as insignificant as it might seem, has great meaning when expressed with one's whole total energy to help all people in society and all those who feel Buddhism is so necessary. For these people he had used this and worked it fully, expressing this meaning in his last poem:

*Sogen's one drop of water
For seventy-four years
Used fully, never depleted
Traversing heavens, earth
and all ten directions.*

On The Middle Way and Buddha Nature

{Originally titled 'The self that is not and the life that is'}

When we talk about Buddhist Wisdom, we seldom hear of the life that is being validated. The method that most lineages teach us to get free from suffering is to *see through* the false self, the ego we project and take hold of as if it existed independent of our thought.

In the historical development of these teachings, *anatta*, no self, and *shunyata*, emptiness or the actual non existence of the imagined self were followed by the Middle Way teachings, that are about finding the balance of accounting for the mistakes not only of ego grasping, but also of nihilism, that is negating too much of our experience.

When we fall into nihilism we would to think, for example, that because there is no ego, then nothing exists, no karma, no interdependence, no relative truth as it appears to the minds and in the experience of living beings; that there is no inherent value in all of us, and no need for ethics and loving and compassionate engagement with one another. This is focussing too much on negation, and not on what is revealed if insight practice is done with a clear and distinct purpose.

The Middle Way doesn't minimize or replace what is taught in the annata and shunyata teachings, rather it indicates the fuller truth that is implied in them. What is revealed when we go beyond the false self is our relationship with one another, our connection to our spiritual and biological ancestors, and community; cause and effect, the need for ethics, and our fundamental virtue, our inner light, and our true loving nature.

From this point of view, we can say there is a self that is not, and a life that most certainly is. Going beyond the first leads us to the second, even if this not explicitly mentioned in First and Second Turnings of the Wheel (respectively, the teachings on the selflessness of persons, and all

phenomena we take hold of in our thoughts), there remains this truth that is spoken of in what is sometimes called the Third Turning of Wheel, on our Buddha Nature.

First, the self that is not - is seen and felt by most of us to be something separate, permanent, and unitary, or of a single nature. We have to see for ourselves how this is in our own experience... I'll wait....

Ok?

It's important to directly know how the false self appears to us, so it can be seen through with a bright, clear, and awake mind, repeatedly, and its effects can diminish and eventually disappear from our experience altogether. This takes time, surely, but it's this liberating wisdom that makes the difference between feeling separate from others and from our own depths and profound qualities, and embodying the knowledge of our truth here.

Then, the life that is, by contrast, is essentially connected to others, and to all of this life, to lineages, ancestry, and the natural world. It moves and manifests in profound ways, via art and teaching, illuminating worlds that were not seen before or enjoyed. We are beings of light, and light is our sustenance. This is what is revealed when we go beyond the false ego, and both the conceptual and emotional obscurations.

Thich Nhat Hanh, in his teaching on the Avatamsaka Sutra and Indra's Net, describes how a person living an awakened life is touched and nourished by the light of others who are awake. We take pleasure in the gift of our being here together, in this vast world, full of beauty and endless possibility.

Thinking of both the self that is not and what is revealed is safer than just saying the first one, and then possibly negating too much. And it's certainly safer than saying nothing, and continuing to suffer because we mistakenly

identify with the false self, the self that is not. *There is something seen through, and then, this life that is affirmed, that is sheer luminosity. There is celebration, creative work, divine resourcefulness, and fulfillment.*

The Essential Characteristics of Buddha Nature

{Based on the teachings in the Uttara Tantra Shastra}

All beings are equally endowed with Buddha Nature. It is not something that saints and sages have in a greater measure, and ordinary people have less. In all places and times, in all cultures, for all people, this essential, perfect, true nature is exactly the same. Seeing this at once removes both self denigration, and any pride we may have.

Although their sum is limitless, inconceivable really, a few of its attributes can be described:

What we call Buddha Nature is the source of all positive qualities, up to and including enlightenment, which is freedom from suffering, nibbana, coolness, as well as the realization of all that is good in us.

A few of these qualities inherent in our fundamental nature can be named, as kindness and compassion, intelligence, strength, patience, gentleness, generosity, joy, and peace. These are there simultaneously.

All of the spiritual practice that we do is to reveal and manifest this true nature.

This Buddha Nature in us is indestructible. No matter what sentient beings go through, no matter how deluded they are, no matter how much they suffer or cause others to suffer, it remains the same, and to be realized.

This is the holy amen hallelujah of Buddhism.

Glimpsing this for even a moment can change everything for a person. It can be like finding a single gold coin, when before we thought we were poor; seeing it for a while, in more depth and fullness can be like finding a whole chest of gold in a field - we then have enough for a lifetime, or

several lifetimes. Seeing our Original Nature even more fully, is like seeing first a single ray of light, and then, the dawning of a new day. Everywhere this light illumines, enriches, and brings joy.

It's been known as our intrinsic intelligence, that is self refreshing. We need not look outside of our present experience for it, but certain conditions have to come together for it to be known. The process for knowing it can be understood this way.

The Third Turning of the Wheel depends on the Second, and First

In Buddhism, the teachings on anatta, or personal self-lessness developed into shunyata, the selflessness of all dharmas;

The third turning comes after that, organically, with additional elements active for a person.

Each realization in Buddhism needs a number of factors to come together. The wisdom teachings of the first and second turning need ethics, and meditation, and inquiry, or the kind of clarity that understands directly the nature of our experience. First we remove the conceptual obscurations, and then the qualitative obscurations as well.

The Third Turning of the Wheel, recognizing Buddha Nature in addition to these then is more an awakening of the heart.

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly, as it says in The Little Prince.

Appreciating beauty, having gratitude, humility, and a sense of humor; practicing kindness and compassion, joy, and steadfastness all help to recognize this our true nature.

Buddha Nature is the foundation of the Tantras. This is what we draw from for all our practices.

All of the divine qualities we can access and make use of in our lives, and use to benefit others are contained right here, within this very nature of ours:

The Wisdom, Compassion, Healing Nature, Strength, and Purity, and others.

All these qualities are inseparable aspects of one essential nature.

How wondrous!

If we understand the poetry expressed through the names and forms that are used in our formal practices, then we understand directly how this fundamental nature is, everywhere, at all times. It is beyond any one name and form, custom and time. We can say it is a mystical realization.

This Buddha Nature, the clear light nature of mind, the Dharmakaya, the unconditioned, innate freedom is contained within the earlier Buddhist teachings. Here though is it emphasized, and brought into functioning more fully.

From Buddha Nature arises spontaneous beneficial activity, as needed, and for as long as is needed. It is effortless in a way, inexhaustible, creative, and adaptive, bringing joy and peace, and fulfillment.

Intrinsic Intelligence and Buddha Nature

*Don't be surprised, don't be startled;
all things will arrange themselves.*

*Don't cause a disturbance, don't exert pressure;
all things will clarify themselves...*

- From the Huainanzi

*Sitting quietly, doing nothing,
Spring comes, and the grass grows by itself*

- Basho

Depending on the person, it may be enough to just sit quietly in meditation, letting the mind become clear, for wisdom-insight to manifest. It should be known that *it can* happen this way sometimes, and that this is only possible because we have a wonderful, innate intelligence that can guide us.

In this paradigm, Buddha Nature is the potential we all have to find freedom and ease, and awakening, or revealing this potential is the purpose of all Buddhist study and practice.

It can also happen that our innate intelligence remains covered over, and, lacking good instruction and encouragement, a person can waste a great deal of time and effort in sitting, standing, and walking meditation, and not get any meaningful result. They may even end up worse for it.

The reason some people do not gain a good result is they are not suited for this kind of meditation, and, they have not been given useful guidance to realize their nature. Their teachers are partly to blame here as well.

It should be said though that *there is* a basis for the idea that just sitting is enough to free the mind from wrong views and the afflictive emotions.

Every yogic tradition, from those of the solitary forest meditators, to the Great Perfection, Mahamudra, Taoism, Chan and Zen base their practice and realization of our indestructible, innate intelligence, and its natural unfolding.

For many through the generations the efficacy of this approach has proven its validity. For the right person at the right time, they will tell you, it works just as they say.

When the Chinese sages said that *all things will arrange themselves*, they were speaking a profound truth about this inherent intelligence we all share, and its marvelous functioning.

There's an ease, or an effortlessness to this approach, allied with a deep trust in this inherent nature. When the conditions are right, and we do not interfere, *all things clarify themselves*, and *Spring comes, and the grass grows by itself*.

What could be more amazing than that?

Contemporary teachers emphasize that we need to look honestly at our own capacity for what may be a very simple practice, after all, realizing the nature of mind. They then add that there are other practices we can do, if needed, so that this method is most effective.

They tell us, look carefully: If through sitting and walking, our mind becomes more clear, dispelling ignorance, then we are on the right track.

See for yourself what you need, and what is sufficient for you. Is this not a vital matter?

Sitting Practice and Sacred Outlook

If we practice non-conceptual sitting meditation with Sacred Outlook, we are sitting in the Pure Land, of light and peace. Just as the samsaric world comes from our mind, so does the experience of this being a Pure Land.

With sacred outlook, we are seeing ourselves, and one another, and our world as we truly are; we are accompanied by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, we all have Buddha Nature, and this world is infinitely precious, and beautiful. Especially when sitting with bodhicitta, the dedication to all beings, it is blissful and clear, and wonder to behold. This is how it truly is, when our obscurations are removed. We can also practice, to familiarize ourselves with this recognition.

The starting place for learning to see is love. There are the two kinds of obscurations: those of the obscuration of conceptual thought, and the qualitative obscurations that veil the mind. Removing the conceptual obscurations, through quiet meditation then frees us from wrong views, or the ideas we have had, and cultivating the heart qualities removes the qualitative obscurations, so that our experience is bright and clear, deep and rich. This leads to what is called sacred outlook, or pure perception.

By contrast, if we were to practice with ordinary perception, the experience may be one of dullness, and without joy.

As it is often done in Zen circles here, sitting with a nihilistic, mundane view that is so prevalent in American culture at this time can be self reinforcing. I trace this back to the lack of warmth, the emotional quality of Japanese Buddhism as it has been imported here, that of Western teachers, as well as what is being taught.

By comparison, both Chinese Ch'an, as exemplified by Xu Yun, Hsuan Hua, and Sheng Yen, and sitting practice in Vietnamese Buddhism shows a joy

that supports and nourishes a practitioner. If not for this contrast, I wouldn't have been able to recognize the practice of 'just sitting' as potentially being a valid Buddhist path.

If we are not careful, the mundane view, unfortunately, can be self-replicating. So many of the current books on Zen reflect this. There is no mention in many of them of the basics of Buddhism - that suffering has a cause that can be removed, bringing peace; that others are worthy of all our love and care, and that we all have the innate potential for well being, and joy.

Without these as a basis, what we're left with is just an accommodation to *samsara*, *as if this is the best we can do* - the 'Be in the moment' 'Whatever comes, that is your life and practice...' teachings - that sort of thing. When basic Buddhist insights are absent in Zen, there's no way to measure the loss.

I'm sure some people have found their way to Sacred Outlook, Pure Perception simply through sitting in the zendo. This happens when a person has a good heart already, or, if they cultivate their warm-hearted nature, their kindness and compassion for themselves and others. Then when they sit, those qualities mature even further, and this world is gradually revealed to them as a sacred place.

Most of the time though, it doesn't happen like this, at least not that I've been able to observe over the years. By far, most of what we call Zen is from traditions that have not, historically emphasized heart practices, and when Westerners continue that way, the very partial result is evident, in their view, and their absence of joy.

Of course, who am I to say? There may be those with hidden realizations. Best to ask someone other than myself, someone with a deeper connection to those traditions for a guided tour.

I will say this though, coming to it from the perspective of a person who has studied and practiced within the two great non conceptual lineages from Tibetan Buddhism, in the Vietnamese lineage of Thich Nhat Hanh, in the Thai Forest Tradition, and is now learning about the Chinese Mahayana - sitting practice can be a delight and a wonder. It can reveal our innate good qualities, and enable us to help others in many ways, through this one simple and profound practice.

*May we all find our way to truly liberating and enlightening teachings,
practice in a way that is comfortable, and compatible with our own unique nature,
and reveal the heart of the Buddha's wisdom*

The Continual Practice of Right View

Before, during, and after meditation

When we practice any meditation method, there are always either the realization of truth, or some degree of a mistaken conception in it. The best possible way of practicing, of course, would be to have no wrong view from the very beginning, then during the practice itself, and at its conclusion, and between sessions. This is not easy to do, especially when starting out. It should be known why and how this can be done, though, and so I've assembled these reasonings and reflections from Traditional and modern sources and added a few comments, for my own sake, and for the sake of all those who would realize freedom and peace, and have the best gift to offer all beings.

I've divided how this can be understood, and how the practice of right view can be applied into *three parts*, what comes before meditation, sometimes thought of as giving rise to our motivation; then the actual session of meditation itself, and finally the concluding practices, which includes the dedication of merit, and how we go about living our daily lives. All these three periods then can be the continuous practice of wisdom.

Part I. If sentient beings don't exist as we believe...

In Buddhism, the cause of human suffering is a self grasping ignorance that is habitual and pervasive. When this is seen through, or seen for what it is, we experience ourselves and others and our world differently. Grasping at a self unconsciously cuts us off from our ancestors, our teachers, from one another and from our natural world. Removing this false view, we awaken to our connectedness, and inner treasures, joy, compassion, and peace. We enter into a dynamic, creative involvement with all our family and world.

This is the realization that brings an end to samsara, the potentially endless wandering in states of suffering, born of ignorance of our true nature, the nature of everyone else, and this world. This is the knowledge that enables us to help others in provisional ways, becoming sensitive to their needs, with energy and awareness, and it is the means of our being able to help in ultimate ways, by our teaching and example, being a catalyst for their own realization of truth.

How then can we make our way to freedom and to being able to help others? What is the method? There is learning involved, surely, and reflection, questioning, quiet meditation, refining the mind, and working our way through difficult points by ourselves, and with the help of our teachers.

We can begin here: It's taught that the way ordinary people conceive of themselves and others is not the truth. It is fragmentary at best. We think of ourselves as permanent selves, independent, and unitary, as in - of a single nature. This is wrong view, continually appearing to untrained minds. How to proceed?

From Metta and Wisdom:

The freedom from problems, and the attainment of the highest happiness is naturally what all wish for ourselves, and those we care for, and so, of course the question, or sticking point presents itself: how can we wish happiness for ourselves or another if they don't exist as we imagine?

When this question comes up, it's something of a landmark, I think. It means we're trying to integrate these two aspects of the path, of love and wisdom, and something doesn't seem to fit. But this only means that we haven't yet taken the wisdom side far enough. Resolving this question is of central importance in Mahayana Buddhism, with its vow to help all beings to freedom and ease.

What our senses and concepts present to us, and what we then fixate on, is not what is actually there. We can learn to see through our imaginings, and in fact, out of compassion, this is something we need to learn to do. The way we can have both wisdom and compassion present in our mind is explained by the Eighth century saint, Shantideva, in his *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, where he asks,

'If no beings exist [in ultimate reality], toward whom should we have compassion?'

and he answers:

'To attain the result [of buddhahood, which is to be achieved only through the awakening of great compassion], one should direct one's compassion toward whatever it is that unenlightened beings call 'beings'.

The modern day Tibetan teacher, Deshung Rinpoche, also taught on this same subject, when he said:

'On the conventional level of reality, beings do not exist as they are perceived by other unenlightened beings. The bodhisattva realizes that, in ultimate reality, there are no beings who exist as unenlightened beings think, but he directs his mind toward those beings as they perceive themselves.

'On the ultimate level, he sees no beings, but he realizes that on the conventional level, beings think they exist and do experience suffering. Out of objectless compassion, therefore, he directs his mind toward them.'

Integrating this insight

The insight that is gained through deep practice is different from intellectual understanding alone, and that has to be fully integrated into our lives and all our interactions. We do this by continued learning and reflection, and by continually cultivating our understanding, both in meditation time and during our daily lives.

Part II. During practice itself

'The Buddha's activities are magical displays that dispel the nightmare visions of sentient beings', said Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche.

Freda Bedi said, *'Mahayana is the philosophy, Vajrayana is the practice'*.

We can represent *our motivation and Right View* to our minds symbolically in practices that use visualization.

The following is adapted from a teaching by Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche:

(In Vajrayana) We aspire to a nonconceptually performed practice, free from grasping or clinging. This means that when we practice or meditate, we should not relate to our visualization as if it were a solid object.

Our visualization must be experienced as a dynamic display of the true nature, like a transcendent wisdom rainbow body. We must understand that the visualization is totally empty of inherent existence, yet totally full of dynamic energies of love, compassion, and wisdom.

Here is where we can use meditation to integrate our understanding. We train in seeing the world we live in as translucent, made of light, and holy, and that we are upheld by countless Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Saints and Sages, ancestors, and the sacred powers of the earth, sky, water, and fire. In this way, the tantras affirm that divine help is always available in abundance. Visualization in this way can be the expression of Right View.

We can represent the way things are by the practice of seeing ourselves and others and this world as transparent like a rainbow, with light shining through, appearing and yet ungraspable. What's more, when we realize our inherent worth and the preciousness of ourselves and others and this

world, we can intentionally visualize all this as being divine in nature, poetically adorned with jewels, exalted, and uplifting to behold in every way.

Part III. Dedicating the merit of formal practice and carrying Right View into our daily lives

Khenpo Choga has said:

'The strongest way to dedicate merit is called 'a dedication that does not conceptualize the three factors'. This dedication is done while recognizing the buddha nature. In that recognition there is no subject who dedicates the merit, no merit to be dedicated and no object who receives the merit. A mind that has truly realized the buddha nature actually does pervade the totality of space so the dedication of such a mind actually reaches all beings in all universes. This is the most powerful form of dedication.'

In the words of the Avatamsaka Sutra:

*To all internal and external worlds
Bodhisattvas have no attachment at all,
Yet do not abandon works beneficial to sentient beings;
The great ones cultivate this kind of knowledge.*

*In all lands in the ten directions
They do not depend or dwell on anything;
They do not grasp things, such as livelihood,
And do not arbitrarily create distinctions.*

*They engage with all sentient beings
In all worlds in the ten directions;
Observing their essential nature,
They practice dedication reaching everywhere.*

May all beings have happiness, and the causes of happiness.

May they all enjoy and abundance of well being and peace.

How else can we continue the practice of wisdom in our daily lives?

Unless we are on retreat, most of the time we are not engaged in study or formal meditation, so it's of vital importance that we find ways to continue through our days whatever insights we have gained from our study and contemplation. If we're only wise when we're sitting or walking then the experience is still only a precious seed that needs mindfulness to flower into realization, which is stable, and with us at all times.

Integrating Wisdom begins with our understanding and insight. By our study and practice, quiet meditation, and our own investigations and analysis, we can then tell when ignorance / wrong view or Transcendent Intelligence is functioning in our daily life. This is like telling the difference between being asleep or day dreaming, and believing in the reality of our dreams, or waking up, and knowing they were just thoughts, just dreams.

Khenpo Karthar taught:

'There is nothing wrong with appearances. They are not in themselves an obstacle. It is our confusion about them that is the obstacle. Because of our confused habit of fixating on appearances as being true and real, we cling to them and to our concepts about them and experience suffering. When we realize at the moment they arise that these appearances have no true existence, then appearances will never be a problem or obstacle for us again.'

To continue this practice, there are phrases we can keep in mind throughout the day. For example,

The Eight Verses of Thought Transformation concludes with

*Realizing the nature of appearances,
I will liberate my mind from the bondage of attachment*

And the Seven Point Mind Training Teachings has the instruction:

Between sessions, be a child of illusion...

Geshe Rabten said:

'When we are out of formal meditation on emptiness and again have to experience our external environment, we should regard the mistaken view we have of it, which will still continue to arise, as merely the illusory creation of the ignorant propensities in our mind. Since we have seen previously in the meditational period that the object of such a mistaken view is empty of independent existence, we should regard this deceptive view of things as completely false, just as the conjurer regards his illusory creations... This will help to diminish the force of the ignorance that clings to the independent existence of all phenomena. Thus, meditation and post-meditation sessions will be mutually beneficial.'

This is as important as formal practice itself.

The thought 'this is my karmic perception...'

In preparation for dream yoga, students are encouraged to view their experience with the thought, *this is my karmic perception*. Hard as it may be to believe, we can see how this is true when we engage some practice that changes our mind, and our experience. Usually we don't regard our own mind as contributing anything at all to the way we experience things, but carrying this thought with us, and experimenting with it, shows us the nature of our thoughts and experience. It helps us to awaken, see through our projections, and touch reality.

Lama Yeshe prayed:

May all sentient beings discover that all the appearances of their ego are projections of their mind. Whatever self-existent thoughts, whatever concrete concepts of

*objects, whatever fears they have, may they discover them to be mental projections.
and also may the nature of mind be recognized as non-dual.*

This completes a description of how to practice Buddhist Wisdom teachings in a cycle of three periods of time, before, during, and after meditation, supportive of each other.

*May all beings realize the nature of mind,
liberating wisdom, uprooting suffering,
May that knowledge not decline,
and may it be integrated throughout all their lives*

A recommended reading, viewing, and listening list

On Meditation:

A Resource of the Practice of Meditation, by Jason Espada

Thich Nhat Hanh: Breathe!, You Are Alive!

(also published at 'The Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing');

A Guide to Walking Meditation

Teachings on Meditation - includes transcripts of his commentaries on gathas

Ajahn Pasanno's 2005 Winter retreat talks, on the Anapanasati Sutta

Ajaan Lee: Keeping the Breath in Mind; Inner Strength

Bokar Rinpoche: Meditation - Advice to Beginners

On the jhanas

Henepola Gunaratana: Beyond Mindfulness in Plain English

Bhante Gunaratana's 2004 Jhana retreat talks

On Samatha:

Gen Lamrimpa: Calming the mind (also published as 'Samatha Meditation')

Geshe Sopa: Steps on the Path, volume 4: Samatha

On Metta:

Jason Espada: Living in Beauty - Buddhist Loving Kindness practice

Sharon Salzberg: Loving kindness

Ajahn Pasanno's 2008 Metta retreat talks

These talks have also been transcribed, and are offered online with the title Abundant, Exalted, Immeasurable.

On Wisdom:

A Key to Buddhist Wisdom Teachings, by Jason Espada

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu: The Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree

Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro: The Island

Thich Nhat Hanh: The Heart of Understanding; The Diamond that Cuts Through Affliction

Wisdom Teachings by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Teachings on Mahamudra

Great Perfection Teachings, Jason Espada, editor

General Introductions to Buddhism

Thich Nhat Hanh: *The Miracle of Mindfulness; The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*

Ani Tenzin Palmo: *Reflections On A Mountain Lake; Into the Heart of Life*

Kenpo Kathar: *Dharma Paths*

Chagdud Tulku: *Gates to Buddhist Practice*

Lama Yeshe: *Wisdom Energy I and II; The Essence of Tibetan Buddhism; Make Your Mind an Ocean; Becoming Your Own Therapist; The Peaceful Stillness of the Silent Mind; Life, Death, and After Death; Freedom Through Understanding;; Ego, Attachment, and Liberation; Silent Mind, Holy Mind*