

Mahayana Buddhism

by Jason Espada

Mahayana Buddhism - Introduction

Mahayana means ‘the great way’, that aims to benefit all people, and all forms of life. This word comes from one of the ways a person can practice Buddhism. The motivation for their meditation, prayers, ritual and mantra can be not just for their own sake, but for for the sake of all their precious family, and *for the sake of all beings*.

The heart of the mahayana motivation

To make it plain, if we first look just at this quality of a path being *mahayana* alone - of it having this beautiful, loving, and all embracing, universal nature - then we can see a Mahayana Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism, or Indigenous religion. A person who is living for others can even be without any tradition at all and, to my mind, still be a mahayanist. This is not the usual way of speaking, I know, but it can help us know the nature of a supremely life affirming path.

Sometimes we can get lost in the struggles of our own personal life, or our culture and times. We can become a prisoner of the moment. The great way - the mahayana motivation - then can help us to make our way through life’s difficulties. It holds whatever is happening in a larger context. Little things don’t bother us as much because we have a large view, one that is not just for ourselves alone, and we are also thinking for the long term.

The so common ‘eight worldly motivations’ that people have- around material gain and loss, pain and pleasure, fame and obscurity, praise and criticism - don’t move us any longer, and this is a *great relief*. Our lives become so much easier. As I hope we will all find out for ourselves, the mahayana view also brings us maturity, and to genuine fulfillment as human beings.

The history and resources of Mahayana Buddhism

Once we see this much of the universal motivation people can have, it helps to approach the history of Mahayana Buddhism. About 500 years after the Buddha’s physical passing from this world, collections of teachings such as the Perfection of Wisdom and Avatamsaka Sutras were written down that described the practices and praised the great qualities of this path of universal benefit. Over the centuries, noble teachers such as Nagarjuna, Atisha, Asanga, Shantideva and others then taught methods to develop the loving, compassionate and liberating mahayana

mind. Those of us who have a connection can draw from this extensive body of inspired teachings.

When we study Buddhism, we receive teachings on developing our inherent good qualities, and we also receive the blessing of our teachers and spiritual ancestors. Although it is not often talked about, there is an esoteric aspect to our traditions as well. On the subtle planes, a tradition is a reservoir of blessing power, insight and inspiration built up over many generations. This sacred energy is a resource we can draw from. This is true of all the different Buddhist traditions and lineages. They each have unique and precious qualities we can know and benefit from. Every true religious tradition has produced saints as well, and the influence of their realization surely outlasts their physical body. They are a blessing to the whole world, and especially to their lineage.

The development of the awakened heart

The nature of the awakened heart everywhere it is found is to help others as much as possible. In it, two aspects are always present, those of loving compassion, and understanding. Compassion is vitally important here. Without it, there will be no urgency to put an end to suffering. If we have the capacity to hold in our heart the awareness of what is difficult or tragic, even for a short while, it can be a powerful force for good in our lives, in the lives of all those we love, and in our world.

The core of the Mahayana Buddhist motivation is called *bodhicitta*, the awakened heart. The view in this Tradition is that the best thing we can do for others is to help them to become free from all their suffering and its causes. To do this we need to awaken and liberate ourselves, then we can help others to reach that same state. Bodhicitta is called *the sole thought on everybody's side*.

A bodhisattva, (literally an ‘awakening being’) is someone who is dedicated to the temporal and ultimate benefit of all beings, providing them with all they need and wish for. The bodhisattva vow is traditionally phrased as *May I become a Buddha in order to lead all others to that very same state*. This is the heart of the Mahayana. With this, they say, we ‘enter the family of the Buddhas’. Its motivation is expressed in this way

*May I cause the pacification
Of all sentient beings afflictions*

And in the poetic language of Shantideva

*As long as diseases afflict living beings,
may I be the doctor, the medicine,
and also the nurse who restores them to health*

*May I fall as rain to increase the harvests that must feed living beings
and in times of dire famine,
may I myself be food and drink*

*For as long as space exists,
and for as long as living beings remain,
may I too abide,
to dispel the misery of the world*

As one teacher said, Strive to give the taste of bliss to others!

The Chinese Mahayana Buddhist teachings speak of something they call ‘vow power’. This is the deep motivation that all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have to help others, guided by wisdom and compassion. This is also something that can become a very real force in our own life. It has the potential to open us up, and to help us awaken our inner resources, of great strength, patience, courage, clarity, peace and joy.

We should realize at this point, as Lama Yeshe said, that we don’t have to have completed the path before we can begin to act. He taught that we should just help others as much as we can, always working to deepen our wisdom, and the effectiveness of our work.

Em Ah Ho! How wondrous!

*May all beings benefit.
May we all learn about and awaken the motivation to be of universal benefit,
find a path that suits us best,
and then practice diligently to actualize all of our noble aims*

*May all beings everywhere be free from suffering and the causes of suffering
May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness*

A brief description of the contents

In this collection of essays I'd like to offer the traditional Buddhist ways we can cultivate the awakened heart. There is a natural development to the awakening mind, that begins with cultivating loving kindness progressively, step by step. A person can also enter the path further along, of course, and it can make sense to them because of their temperament, or past karma. However, there is a logic to them as they unfold organically.

I begin then with a few essays (1 to 8) on the spiritual qualities of love, leading naturally to the bodhisattva vow (9 to 12). The Mahayana *Thought Training* teachings (13) follow naturally as the enhanced application of this motivation.

The Lam Rim, or Stages of the Path teachings (14) can be seen as a sequence of meditations that lead to Buddhahood. They can also be placed in context of the Thought Training, clarifying and strengthening our motivation.

I follow this with two on Wisdom, (15 and 16) as it forms a bridge to what follows.

The section titled Entering the World of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas has essays on devotion (17 to 19), Pure Perception, (20 and 21), Prayer, (22), and mantra, (23 to 26).

I conclude with one essay on benefitting the three times, (27) based on a teaching by Thich Nhat Hanh, and an article on dedication prayer (28).

May all beings benefit.

Mahayana Buddhism

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Part I. Buddhism, Love and Compassion

Universal love, the ground and culmination of our practice

Unconditional love, and radical inclusiveness

An Awakened Heart

The Great Bridge to Universal Love

The Empowerment of Compassion

No Place for Anger

Loving your enemies – returning good for harm

Metta, the Four Brahma Viharas, and Bodhicitta

Universal love, the ground and culmination of our practice

When we first hear the ideal of universal love for all beings, our reaction might be one of disbelief, or doubt that we could ever approach such a state. We have a hard enough time even liking, let alone loving ourselves, and getting along with just our friends, family and co-workers is a challenge too. Universal love? Come on! We could also have the response of holding this as an ideal and then going no further with it. It can stay just as a concept, and become an ego trip.

In the Metta Sutta, the Buddha taught

*'just as a mother loves and cherishes her child, her only child,
just so we should cultivate boundless love to offer to all...*

and,

'our love will know no obstacles...

All religions teach this in some form, and what the Buddhist tradition contributes is the method to gradually develop such love. This is something that doesn't happen by itself, or by just wishing it to be so, or without a cause, and that cause is the meditation that brings real love more and more into our relationships.

Surprisingly, there is something of universal love in us right from the beginning of practice. This is the ground of our common humanity, our divine nature, also called our Buddha Nature. We may not believe in it, and may doubt that we can love even ourselves, let alone another person, or all, but that potential exists in all of us, waiting to be known and revealed.

Right from the beginning, it's this potential that we tap into when we start anywhere to have metta for self and others. As metta increases in our lives, directing pure well wishing to family, friends, and the strangers we see, it gets easier in all ways. This is because this love is one.

Love reveals our true identity, and our real family. As we practice this kind of meditation more and more, our sense of identity shifts from the surface, history, form, and culture, to the more universal ground, to what is fundamental to us all.

We find we share a common heritage with those in this, and in other places and times.

I remember one teaching where Thich Nhat Hanh was saying how a Frenchman, standing on French soil, could also see himself as standing on the continent of Europe, or on the one earth we all share, and if he was able to do so, his feeling of who he was would grow by that much. So it is with metta. We don't suddenly lose our relative identity, but we can find that it is held within a greater truth, and that is what we more truly are. This is the source we draw from all along the way in our practice.

How can we tell if we're really progressing towards an all-embracing, universal love? I think the signs are that we gradually become more respectful, patient, encouraging, and supportive of ourselves and others. We can sense a greater consistency in our responses to our own problems, and to what we meet in other people. We're not as up and down, sometimes accepting and at other times negligent or aversive.

What's more, we can see the quality of how we are with our own inner state and with others improve gradually. There's more joy, and forgiveness, and generosity flows more readily, and in greater abundance. This is bound to be inspiring to see and think about. It leads us to wonder what more we are capable of. The ideal of universal love, at last, can start to seem conceivable.

Love would have us go carefully, not hurry, and not leave out any steps. Though the ideal is so appealing, and so much what we need in our lives and in the world, there's the danger that we may gloss over the inner work that needs to be done to arrive at a real love for all.

The line, '*our love will know no obstacles*' is significant here because it points to something we have all had experience with, of becoming more able to love, and it is onward leading. Where there was once some keeping back, a change took place, even slightly, and we were able to take the next step, and the next in loving. If we go gradually, and continue in the practice, like a river, metta will find its way to the ocean. We will arrive at all embracing, universal love.

That universal love is both the ground and the goal of spiritual practice for us all is really something to honor and celebrate.

Hafiz says:

*a divine seed,
the crown of destiny,
is hidden and sown
on an ancient fertile plain
you hold the title to...*

and Rumi adds:

*you are the secret treasure bearer,
and always have been...*

*If you knew yourself for even one moment,
if you could just glimpse
your most beautiful face,
maybe you wouldn't slumber so deeply
in that house of clay.*

*Why not move
into your house of joy...*

Culture, religion, class, gender, age, history, political party, accepting this, rejecting that – so many ways we build walls. Metta instead builds bridges, until we arrive at the joy of knowing how we are made for each other.

May we all realize this love as our true home

May we awaken and learn to be practical and inclusive, so that, in the words of the Metta Sutta,

Whatever living beings there may be;

Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,

The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,

*The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to-be-born—
May all beings be at their ease!*

Unconditional love and radical inclusiveness

When live our days with acceptance of ourselves and others, and love, we open. We find that what we need, *what we all need*, is not some partial, conditional love – the love that bargains, but an unconditional love. This is kind of love that says, “No matter where you are, or what you’re going through, I’m here for you”. This is what we need to truly open to ourselves, and to each other, and to see our depths; to support and encourage ourselves and others, and to heal and to be whole.

We need the kind of love that is *a radical inclusiveness*. It is radical in the sense that it is a sharp turn from the partial, the measured, the conditional.

Depending on where we are, radical inclusiveness is going to mean different things: for some it will mean learning to embrace old or new hurt, missed opportunities, or grief; for others, it will be expanding to include more of our family, or republicans, militarists, the addict, the disengaged... and on and on...

This same kind of love is what we then bring out into the world, with all its divisions, strife, hunger, despair, and immaturity; with all its beauty and potential. With the radical inclusiveness of love at its best, we feel there is no obstacle that can’t be overcome, no state we have to recoil from. Even those challenges that have not yet risen are included.

This great love goes out to meet the world as it is, knowing without the slightest doubt how beautiful it can be, and knowing this basic nature we have to work with that is everywhere. This love is unyielding, irresistible, inspiring self and others. It is in our eyes and in our hearts, and in our hands, working to set our world right.

Unconditional love has the advantage over other kinds of love in that it can remove fear of ‘the others’, and any doubt in our capacity to respond. However we name it, the Divine, our Buddha Nature, our own depths, it opens us up to a resource that is limitless, creative, and skillful.

If we leave anything out, any person or group or state of being, we’ve somehow fallen short of what love can be. To take up *all of our life here, all our relations*, is to see their worth, and to bring out the best we have in us and in this world. Is there any other way forward to positive, lasting change? Is there anything more grounded and optimistic than starting where we are, with a vision of truth and beauty?

May we all find and make manifest
such love and inclusiveness,
and teach our children,
all their days,
to do the same

An Awakened Heart

To have perspective means we know where we are. It guides and supports us on the Way...

My thoughts at the beginning of this little book were the same as those I have now, that the contemplative life and life in the world are interdependent. They condition each other. What we are, and what we do with our lives happens because of others.

Martin Luther King said, “All life is interrelated. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.

“What effects one directly, effects all indirectly.” “Strangely enough, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.” “This is the way the world is made. This is the interrelated nature of reality.”

I can only imagine the resources your son and daughter have now in school to learn about this world we live in. Now, more than ever before, we can learn about and interact with others, but what will we do with it? Things are changing so quickly, as everyone knows, but where are we all headed? We all have a responsibility to the times we live in....

It’s a curious thing, you know, to pause as history unrolls, and to reflect....

In terms of what was needed in the past, and what is needed now, I’d say that every generation could have answered with many of the same points. Looking back, there are some perennial truths that shine through.

To narrow it down, for me there are just these two essential things: perspective, and, probably the most important thing, an awakened heart.

Think of all the good that could come to our world from these two! It’s amazing to think on... And, it’s clear that we need both of these. These are things that anyone can practice, lay or ordained, single or with a family.

So, first, perspective:

Do you ever wonder, just how far ahead of his time Dr. King was? In the 1960's, he proposed *a world perspective*, and, make no mistake, the logic of it is irrefutable. This was then, and is still the ideal of what it would mean to be an educated, mature human being, living in a mature culture.

It is also regrettably far from where most of us are, on most days, in this the early part of the 21st century, in America. so, what to do? There's a serious danger if we just jettison the ideal. That's how people and cultures gradually aim lower and lower, in their expectations and ethics. Culture diminishes slowly, but in the most tangible and tragic ways.

Another choice is that we can keep this ideal in mind, seeing the great, life affirming value of thinking beyond ourselves.

For busy people, or even just the good person concerned with family and community, often the needs of the day take all their time and energy. Look at what happens though, personally and collectively, when the world 'contracts down' – even neighbors, *even family* can become strangers – when in other parts of the world, this is inconceivable!

To keep the larger perspective, of family, community, region, country, continent and world in mind is a reference point – something to incline the mind and move towards to keep us real. This is the antidote that can keep us from potentially unlimited, narcissistic, self preoccupation, and the neglect of others, even in our own family.

As we become more capable, more free inwardly and more available, naturally, the world opens up, and we are enriched and nourished by that. Our choices are guided by what we know then. In *this* sense then, there is a great need in this world for more liberated people – people who have become free of their own psychology. Liberation is more than that, certainly, there is great joy and peace to it, but this is the part of it that I'd like to highlight here, that of *becoming available*.

Then, so our actions in this more expansive view are not just exploitive, or for our own entertainment, in other words, so that our actions are *right*, we need one more piece, and that is, we need an awakened heart. What is an awakened heart?

I'd say it is a heart that receives, and is enriched by beauty, and the wonders of life; it is one that has gratitude for the gifts others have bequeathed to us, and is alive to their preciousness;

Everywhere they go, a person with an awakened heart gives happiness to others – that's just their nature; We've all known people like this...

Like the sail on a ship, an awakened heart is inspired by works of meaningful purpose going on in our world *today*; To have an awakened heart means to have right values, and a moral compass in daily life, independent of authority and tradition; An awakened heart is everywhere sensitive to other lives, and naturally acts to fulfill the needs and wishes of others, without needing to be told what to do.

An awakened heart is expansive, by its nature it reaches out, more and more, until all are included, to nurture, to comfort, to uplift;

'When we hear the cries of the world, we must be engaged...'

When the heart is awake, there is a radical and uncompromising solidarity with the poor, of every kind, with all who are struggling; and there is the willingness to do whatever needs to be done to ease the way for them;

For these reasons, it is a heart full of joy every day; In any place, and at any time, a person with such a heart has great inner strength, courage, confidence and resourcefulness. It is always this way.

People who are awake in this way are beyond any one tradition. On some level, they are universalists, equally at home with all traditions. Strange to say, isn't it?, but it's true! You find people like this everywhere, in every time. They may not be many, relatively, but they exist, and are so needed, especially now, for understanding, and for our common sake, in these budding 'post-racial', 'post-sectarian' times.

Sometimes people appeal to our reason, and survival instinct when talking about interdependence, and the need for us to look out for each other. They say it's only enlightened self interest for us to do so. But this is way too much stick and not nearly enough carrot for my taste. If you ask me, we've got it back-asswards if we're still trying to convince the so- small thinking mind.

There's another way to go about this, that looks to accomplish the same end, and is more inviting to think on: The simple fact of the matter is that a life that is aware of, and responsive to the needs of others in this world, is a life of far greater fulfillment. Who wouldn't want the best for themselves? Let it be so, then.

The Great Bridge to Universal Love

Of the categories in metta, or Buddhist loving kindness practice, of self, friends and those closest to us, neutral people, those we have difficulty with, and all beings, the one that gets talked about the least is clearly the neutral person. This is understandable, after all. The dear person category is easy, and enjoyable, and everyone who takes up metta practice wants to at least lessen their aversion to the enemy category. ‘All beings’, also, feels good even just to think about. But where does that leave the group of those people we don’t know personally? As we’ll see, all the categories in metta practice are important, and have an essential role to play.

When we think about it, this category of metta for neutral people forms the bridge between those we know and care about, and those we do not, and almost certainly will never know personally. This expands the field of our metta practice immeasurably.

Of the three obstacles to metta, those of attachment, aversion and ignorance, attachment is purified, or removed by having pure metta towards dear ones; aversion is removed by cultivating metta for those we have problems with, and ignorance, manifesting here in this category as indifference and neglect, is removed by developing metta for the so-called ‘neutral person’.

I’ve thought of this last group more as – those we don’t know personally, that we see, or who are known to us, and then, those who are unknown to us. This brings it closer to home. As with the other categories of metta, there is a step-wise progression we can follow to develop well wishing and care for this entire group.

We start with those we see, and reflect on how they are like ourselves, and our family and friends too, in that they want only happiness, and not even the slightest suffering for themselves, and their friends and family. If we can meet another in this way, then they are not a stranger to us. We can treat the clerk at the convenience store as a human being, as we would want ourselves, and our loved ones to be treated.

We can tell if this is working or not by how we then respond to those we don’t know on such places as public transport. If it is working, we should be able to notice some difference in how we spontaneously feel towards them. When we find we are warming up to these people, then we can take the next step in the practice.

From there, it's much easier to begin to extend care also to *those we don't know personally, and who we don't meet directly* (which is by far the larger part of this category). We reflect that those people too have wants and needs, and like ourselves, friends and family, and just like those we don't know that we *do* meet, they also deserve our respect and care.

There are many ways we can extend love towards this larger group. Thinking of others can start out as a concept, but it's important that it doesn't remain there. So that it doesn't become a vague abstraction, we can always aim to learn about and become more familiar with how others are living. Organizations like Kiva can be a big help here. They facilitate micro-loans, via the internet, to people in Third World countries. There are short biographies, and pictures to help us get a more grounded sense of who's out there;

Or we could take up the cause of animal rights, basing the extension of our care on what we feel for the lives of the animals we do know and see.

We may say that the lives of those without health care in our country are not our business, *but we can make it our business*; or that the way people live in the slums of Rio, or in Kenya, or in America is none of our business, *but we can make it our business*;

We may think it's beyond us to be concerned with the availability of basic medicines in the Third World, *but we can, in fact, choose to make it our business*; we might think that Monsanto introducing untested, genetically modified food into the market, without letting people know is not our business, *but we can make it our business*;

We may not pay attention to the economies and environment in China, India, and Latin America, and how the people's lives in those places are effected, *but we can make it our business* to know and find ways to respond to it...

I know some people are bound to object here and say it's all too much, and that there are too many needs in our world to give time and attention to them all, and they do have a point. What we can do though is to take care of ourselves well, and then to identify a few causes where we feel we can make a difference, and do what we can right there. It's important though that we don't shut out the rest of it from the overall way we see our lives. We should learn as much as we can about this

whole world of living beings that we share, and then try to be responsible human beings.

One of the precepts of Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing says, 'do not close your eyes before suffering', and *of course, this isn't comfortable*, but our humanity calls us to it. If we can live with this awareness, although we won't be able to solve every problem right away, in time we might be able to find a way to make a difference. Now isn't that something?

These are all ways we can extend metta in the category of those we don't personally know. I'm sure we can all think of other ways, if we spend some time with it. In each case, we can ask, What would love have me do here? or, How would I respond if this were happening to those I know and care about? This is what actually makes the bridge, to all-inclusive love.

I think part of why we may not give much attention to this group is because of how it's been named. I mean, 'neutral person'? – not too spicy, eh? So, I would like to kick-start the campaign to increase interest in this category, and propose 'The Great Bridge to Universal Love', or something like that. Really, I'm only half kidding here, because it *is* this, after all.

We can make others' concerns our own, and their joys and sorrows something we register, and respond to, and when we do this we find that our metta has grown by that much.

To aim to go in the direction of really having love for all is truly a most noble aspiration, and the great advantage of the method of metta practice is that it shows how we can actually accomplish this. Now, how amazing is that? Once we know the metta teachings, the way is open for those of us who want to take it.

May all beings,
known and unknown,
seen and unseen,
be entirely well and at their ease,
and may they have every happiness.

The Empowerment of Compassion

It takes strength to be aware of suffering and not be overwhelmed by it. Driving past the tent city on Division street, some people will look at the homeless for just a moment, and quickly turn their attention to something else. For some, the sight of those who own nothing more than they can carry makes a deeper impression, and it can be depressing to think about any long term problem where there is no easy solution.

As it is with the racism in this country, and its inequality, its endless wars, neglect of the poor and our home, none of these can be addressed in shorthand. As much as we may have advanced, we have not yet given enough of our time, energy and intelligence to solve these problems. Instead, in 2016, we are a largely distracted, immature, and self-absorbed consumer culture. Worst of all, too often, those free and educated enough to effect change look away to the next party, the next game, the next escape.

I take solace here in the fact that there are many conscientious people, who work each day to make a difference, but it is not easy. When we meet what seems like an insurmountable challenge, it's tempting to give in to despair, both for this generation, and for our future. Fortunately for us, there are inner resources we can tap into to help us respond more effectively. Compassion is that unique human quality that expresses our kinship, and that gives us strength and hope.

Compassion is not despair

On the surface, compassion may look like despair. In both cases the initial feeling is one of sadness. But where in despair we are overwhelmed, and made weak as a child, with compassion there comes the energy to work. There are times when some indomitable force rises up in us. Just look at those workers, mothers and fathers and friends and strangers who go out each day to do what's needed, and when there is some crisis, new strength enters their limbs.

When I think of those activists who marched, and who wrote, and who spoke out over the years, I know they did it both for themselves, and for the coming generations. That strength they had to begin, and to keep going was the perennial strength of compassion, and this is something we can all use now.

Where despair feels like surrender, compassion has no quit in it. The doubting mind is also closely tied to fear, and it is a small and contracted state, but the mind of compassion is broad and clear and fearless. It imagines great things, such as clean water, and people being fed and housed, and gets to work to get them done.

When we are in a state of doubt and despair and distraction, we are shut down. We are confused and only using a small part of our inherent wealth. By contrast, compassion helps us to know just what is essential about our being here: to care for one another as best we can. A light wakes up in us. It is great love and compassion that begins in response to the great and small needs; it is compassion that has us continue; and it is this same power in us that goes on for as long as it takes to complete the works of justice, healing and peace.

I praise the dawning of compassion in each and every one of us today, and all of its works. May it flourish in us all.

No Place for Anger

Forgiveness is a very Western word and idea. It makes some assumptions that are not there in Buddhism, and, as a method, in the way it's usually practiced, it often only goes so far. In Buddhism, the insight that is offered into wrong or hurtful actions is that they arise from ignorance. This includes actions motivated by people's greed and attachment, and people's angry or violent words and actions. Looked at this way, there is no place for anger.

Shantideva says that when we're hit with a stick, we don't get angry at the stick, but at the person wielding it. By the same token he says, we shouldn't direct our anger at the person, but at the delusions that are controlling them. Far from what we usually think of as anger, this is right directed intensity of action. Look at the wrathful deities in Tibetan Buddhism: it's taught that this is not anger, but the manifestation of great power directed towards ending suffering and its cause.

When once asked what he thought about the actions of another person, Lama Yeshe said, 'How can I get angry at them – they're a sentient being'. Clearly, that emotional response was foreign to him because of his training and accomplishment of the teachings.

There's a scene in the movie *The Killing Fields*, where the reporter is reunited with his friend and interpreter, who he had left behind in Cambodia many years ago. He immediately says, 'I'm sorry!, Forgive me!, Forgive me!', and Dith Pran says, 'There is nothing to forgive!' Now, this kind of mind, I know, is so seldom known in the West that it takes some investigation to see what is at work there. We feel justified, when someone harms us or those we love, in wanting that person to suffer in turn, or at least in holding onto the feeling of that person or group as being eternally wrong or evil. We want them to pay, somehow, or at the very least, we'll exclude them from our thoughts and considerations. If they're in trouble, we'll feel justified in not responding. At least this much we carry as resentment, directed outwards.

Every level of anger, bitterness, and resentment toward people or groups also has its effect on our own psyche-soma. We, ourselves, suffer physically and mentally.

There's a good reason why the afflictive emotions are called poisons the Buddhist teachings. The three poisons are greed, hatred, and delusion. We can see the effect of these in our own lives, and in the lives of others. To some extent, the effect is always toxic. Sometimes these three are extended to five, including then jealousy and pride. I've taken to thinking of this teaching as referring to all afflictions, so I add fear and sadness to this list. They all effect us negatively on every level. These are what we should work to become free from, and help others to become free from.

On a spiritual level, we can say that anger or unforgiveness blocks the flow of grace in our lives. It blocks the light. It can sour our experience.

They say that when a person has vinegar in their mouth, that everything tastes bitter, but when they have the taste of honey on their tongue, their experience is sweet.

If we observe and experiment, we can tell in our own lives how the habits of our own thinking colors, or obscures our mind. We can also see how our thinking can cause these veils to lessen, and how the world can become bright again.

Much worse than the moments of pride or anger are the habits of mind we cultivate over the years. We all know people who don't see beauty anymore, and frequently their anger is not only coming from this state of deprivation, but causing it as well. We can cloud our mind with anger or resentment, even a little, and we can free ourselves from this. When we do this, the mind's true nature reveals itself as clear, bright, and joyful.

To the extent that we have wisdom seeing how wrong actions are caused by ignorance and nothing else – and that there's no agency in there somewhere that needs to be punished, anger and bitterness dissolve and do not rise again.

One thing people always do, when trying to justify their anger and resentment, is that they bring up the most extreme examples of cruelty, as if that proves their point. But what this does, almost without fail, is that it stirs up the mind of the speaker, and often the listener too, so that the roots of harmful actions can't be seen. Being whipped up emotionally, the nature of wrong actions isn't considered. Such people don't really want to listen, or dialogue, they just want others to agree with them. But what if all wrong and harmful action was of a kind? What then? The flaw in this thinking that feels justified being angry is that it can be extended

the more you think about it. There can be no peace in such a mind, only the dredging up of past events, and endless rehearsal for conflict, and for war.

I remember reading a news story once, and how it suddenly occurred to me how so many stories of crimes take the implicit stance that ‘here is this normal person, and look at what they did’. Instead of seeing them as confused, or sick, or deranged, or deluded, and in need of help, we treat them as though there is something wrong in how they behave that will be remedied by punishment. What foolishness!

This has got to be the cruelest irony, that we seek redress by punishment. A confused person is not helped by being treated as if there is something fundamentally wrong with them that can be changed by force, or if they only were coerced and agreed to change. If they were instead treated all along the way with the insight that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with them, they could be helped toward that goal of awakening to a fundamental goodness and dignity.

I agree with Ani Tenzin Palmo here, when she said that the Western concept of good and evil, and man’s ‘fallen nature’, is an unimaginably harmful, destructive idea – ‘It’s wicked’, she said. That paradigm only goes so far. If people believe in a just and loving God, they can let go of anger based on the knowledge of how much forgiveness they themselves have needed in their lives, and based as well on the commandment to forgive. But there often lingers the idea that ‘that person did this to me, or my group’, and instead of treating the whole situation as a tragic mistake, born of ignorance, like something done by a blind, drunken, mad person, it’s treated as something that could have been avoided if only that person chose to be good instead of evil. Such thinking reinforces the suffering, and perpetuates it with a strong ego identity that is wrapped up in being the victim.

A Buddhist method by no means justifies what we call evil, or sin, harm or wrong doing. This approach gives us a more profound way of dealing with injury and grievous harm.

It aims to go to the root, and to offer a remedy to suffering, for ourselves and others. This way of working doesn’t give the ‘thrill’ or gratification of anger, but responding with anything less than a full understanding, and instead reacting with threats or punishment only goes so far. It doesn’t bring the lasting change that we can, and should all seek.

A line that’s helped:

‘Buddhas do not blame sentient beings who are flawed,
but with great compassion,
they help free them from the round of suffering’

Thich Nhat Hanh said, ‘When a person suffers, that suffering will spill over, and harm others...’

In the framework of Buddhist thought and practice, there is the idea of

Devotion to all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas,
and compassion for all sentient beings.

and that covers everyone.

This way of thinking is more workable, because it is based on the reality that we all have the potential to live sane, balanced, healthy, naturally respectful and spontaneously ethical lives. We can also, in our ignorance, cause harm to self and others. We have this potential too. If we do not find this out about ourselves, there is no way we can see and extend this kind of regard to others.

Forgiving ourselves and moving on means then, to a Buddhist, having compassion and seeing that what we did came out of confusion, unknowing. Our offence was based on ignorance.

We need much love and compassion, patience and kindness for ourselves because we know our own faults and delusions, how many times we have failed, and harmed ourselves and others so much better than we know the faults of others. We are closest to ourselves.

This may be why we Westerners have so much difficulty being kind to ourselves. Often I’ve been surprised to find the nicest, gentlest people, treating themselves alone harshly. But kindness and compassion for ourself is so necessary.

Ani Tenzin Palmo said, ‘Treat yourself as you would treat your dearest friend. Speak to yourself words you would speak to someone you really cared for.’ And Lama Yeshe, ‘Treat yourself with kindness. If you are kind to yourself, you will be kind to others.’

This is the root, I think, of not harboring enmity, not even a little, towards others. We understand how hard it is to be a human being, to struggle and to suffer, to be unaware and deluded, to be afflicted and to act out of that, and all the problems it has caused ourselves and others.

Uchiyama Roshi made this outrageous sounding statement ‘Everything I encounter is my own life’. It sounds off the charts, until you think about it in light of one’s very own life. It takes a depth of committed contemplative practice, for sure, to arrive at this kind of insight, but, there it is.

Seeing our own faults, in light of what we could be, how can we not repent right then and there and vow to do better?, and at the same time, how can we not respond to others’ suffering with compassion? Doing so starts within us.

That root of kindness and understanding, no longer using the word ‘forgiveness’ (‘nothing to forgive’), that root needs to be deep in us, to that the shade and fruit we offer to others can be real, profound, and abundant.

Seeing and understanding the source of problems in our lives, and not giving rise to anger, is not something that happens once, like flipping a light switch (except perhaps for a very few, very ripe individuals).

To get to that level, so that, all throughout our knowing, we can say, ‘How can I be angry at them? – they’re a sentient being’, this takes both time, and the intelligent application of our best discernment of causes and their results, and of compassion.

To fully free ourselves of even the last remnants of wrong view and afflictive emotions, such as anger, almost all of the time is a gradual process of learning, looking again and again, and integrating that realization.

May it be so for all of us.

Loving your enemies – returning good for harm

for Dom Laurence Freedman

The idea of responding to being insulted or abused with non-reactivity, and then even with love doesn't come along in Buddhist practice until what they would call an advanced stage. By contrast, it's right there, plainly spoken in the Christian teaching, as loving one's enemies.

To me, there's something beautiful about this, in that the goal, of having a universal kindness and goodwill is taught by Jesus right from the beginning in Christianity. At the same time, there's a great benefit to having a step by step method to work with, to cultivate such love, that would otherwise seem unapproachable. It's like having a map through the terrain to where we would go. We hear the ideal in the Scriptures,

*Love your enemies,
bless those who curse you,
do good to those who hate you,
and pray for those who spitefully use
and abuse you
only then can you be called children of your heavenly Father...*

and

*For he makes the sun to rise on the good and evil alike,
and sends rain on both the innocent and the wicked.
If you love only those who love you,
what reward can you expect?
Even the tax collectors do as much as that.
and if you greet only your brothers, what is so special about that?
Even the heathens do as much.*

*There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father's goodness
knows no bounds.*

This ideal can be inspiring to think about., but sometimes, and for many, it can seem impossible. *How does one actually go about getting to that state? How does*

a person develop to the point where they can love all equally, even those who cause harm to them or to their loved ones?

I think that Buddhism has something truly significant to offer here, as it has teachings that lay out the stages of development of such an all embracing love. It's as if the two Traditions are mighty rivers, joining together to point to the goal, and the method of arriving there. Magnificent!

The metta teachings lay out five categories for the gradual cultivation of loving kindness. They begin with oneself, and then those friendly towards us, including family, benefactors and teachers. The third and fourth categories are those of the neutral persons, or those not known to us personally, and those who are hostile to us, sometimes called the category of the difficult person.

Taking a step by step approach, we start the intentional cultivation of the quality of loving kindness with whoever is easiest for us, and go from there. In metta practice, it's only after a person has developed some of that pure quality of care and genuine well wishing for these four different categories of people that they arrive at the fifth, which is the cultivation of loving kindness towards all beings, a true universal love. Before that, it's taught, there's still bias, indifference, or even aversion to be overcome.

Each of these different groups is a rich field of inquiry and investigation. Each one has a place, it would seem, in the progress towards universal concern and active care.

In the West, especially today, it's so clear that many people need to develop more kindness and compassion for themselves. Surprisingly, some of the nicest people we know judge and treat themselves quite harshly. There are many reasons we should be good to ourselves, but here, in the context of developing metta, I'll just mention a few.

When we say, 'do to others as you would have them do to you' – how would we know the wish that others have for themselves, for happiness, safety, and peace, unless we were in touch with that in ourselves? And this is not a one time thing to be glimpsed, or just understood intellectually. We can see how it is, that, when we are in touch with our own tender selves, through a practice of meditation, or some other way to be closely aware of how we are feeling inside, then naturally we are

more considerate of others we're in contact with. We know what it is to be a human being, and we can't help but meet them also as fellow travelers here.

A second reason for developing greater kindness towards ourselves is that it allows us to settle down easily in our meditation. When we're comfortable with ourselves, which is one of the results of this meditation, we can be at ease physically, and in our mind and heart. Metta also brings joy, and clarity and brightness to the mind. Any further study or development we then undertake goes smoothly.

Just to mention one more reason for developing our capacity for kindness towards ourselves relates to the theme of this paper, that of extending love even to those who are hostile towards us. With any type of consistent meditation practice we do, there are going to be ups and downs – good days and days when nothing seems to work. That's when we need for love to come up in us as compassion, gentleness, and even an greater care than before.

Life can be hard, so, what to do? When we really do see our confusion, our impatience, and our mistakes and shortcomings, how can we hold all this? This is the real test and measure of our gradual progress. Here, as with the other categories, as we go, naturally, we find our limitations, and, right there is where we can take the next step, and the next. Right there is where we can work. All this takes patience, and persistence, but it is entirely worthwhile.

The 'friend' category too adds something unique to the progress of developing love. We start with those closest to us, although sometimes it's recommended that we choose a person with whom we have an uncomplicated relationship. There's a good reason for this, in that with them we can feel our simple, heart-felt love for another. It is pure.

There's something to be said though as well here for working with those closest to us in the first place, even if the relationship is more complex. We learn love in this matrix of family. The unconditional love of a mother or father, sibling or other close relative has a reliable, enduring quality to it that we may not find so readily in our friendships.

This is the ideal, of course, and there's a lot of variety in how people's family relationships have turned out. The method is clear about this – we can experiment

and choose whoever is easiest to feel gratitude towards, and are happy to hold in our mind with thoughts of good will.

Sometimes we can then go back and forth, creatively using the method of cultivating metta, as it is suggested we do. It's interesting to experiment here as well. The idea is to find that feeling of easy, genuine good will, and then to direct it to ourselves, family and friends, benefactors and teachers, and then perhaps back to ourselves again.

When we have developed the sense of good will towards a few of our close friends, we extend that also to those we are less close to, and then to those we don't know. The saying of Jesus spells it out clearly for us:

*If you love only those who love you,
what reward can you expect?
Even the tax collectors do as much as that.
and if you greet only your brothers, what is so special about that?
Even the heathens do as much.*

In the Buddhist approach, there's the use of reasoning in times of reflection, which I think is implied in the above passage. When we turn to our less-close friends, and then to those we don't know, sometimes called the 'neutral person' category, we reflect on how they are like ourselves, and like our close friends and family members, in that they too want only happiness, and not the slightest suffering. Just like ourselves, they too want to be appreciated, and to feel that they belong. They suffer, even as we do, from having bodies that are sometimes not too reliable, from moods that can overtake them, from loneliness, fears, and so on. They too appreciate it when someone is kind to them, and when they meet with success in their lives.

We can see how this builds. From ourselves, or someone it's easy to feel loving kindness towards, to those we are close to, and then gradually to those we don't know as well. They suggest we choose specific people to represent this category, of someone we don't know personally, and cultivate good will towards them. It's only slightly a problem that, after a while, we will feel genuine, spontaneous kindness well up when we think of them. It just means we have to look for someone else we may have overlooked in the past, or not taken into consideration. Likely, there will be plenty to discover.

Only after cultivating in this way is the general category of enemy, or difficult person introduced, and even then, within this group, we are advised to go step by step. We can, and often do want to start with the difficult category – and even the most difficult person – the one who has caused us, or someone close to us the most suffering. Though we can try to go directly for developing kindness for that person, it's not recommended, because it's not usually effective. In fact, this is where we meet that 'no, it is impossible' feeling. It means that, though we have a good aim in mind, we're going about it in the wrong way – too directly, instead of step by step. This is like trying to go up a mountain without using the path. We might just look up and say, 'no way'.

There is something organic about the development of love. Some people have a lot of it already, and so, even when they meet with some difficult person, or situation, they can respond from their abundant inner resources of generosity, patience, and kindness. Most of us though, will have to find our way there gradually. Within the category of difficult person, again, there are degrees we can work with, like with lifting weights, or developing a skill, such as playing music.

I learned some things in classical music study that apply here. In classical training, they say that 'slow is fast', meaning that careful, attentive practice will get us to our goal in the most effective way. There is also the tradition, in music pedagogy, of training progressively with studies, so that the more difficult techniques can gradually be mastered. With this under their belt, a person can then play pretty much anything they want.

It's much the same way in cultivating metta for the difficult person, or situation. Standing in line at the bank, or in traffic, are usual ones I can point to, that has no one to blame, in particular, but that gives us some opportunity to develop even a bit more patience, respect for others, and goodwill as we're standing, or idling there.

There are times also when we may feel like our friends or family are not there for us, or have been unkind in some way. Forgiving and letting go of any feelings of recrimination is maybe easiest with this group, because after all, they have done so much for us. Again, we start with those for whom it is easiest for us to let go of past perceived wrongs, and renew the relationship. Then we can gradually extend that skill we've developed.

It's useful, maybe even essential, to include ourselves in the so called difficult person category. There will definitely be times when being with ourselves is not

easy – for whatever reason. It could be an uncomfortable feeling in the body, or some difficult feeling, such as anger or irritation that has arisen. Taking it further, when we look into our lives, we can see how much we need acceptance, kindness, tolerance and forgiveness. That is the basis for extending it to others.

‘Let he who is without sin cast the first stone’, and so on.

Grace and barbarity

I’ve been thinking lately of some of the Christian terms, such as sin and salvation, and especially of grace. It seems we don’t have an equivalent for grace in Buddhism, although I do sense it there as well.

We can talk about karma, and look at it as a kind of cosmic justice – in that wrong actions bring suffering with it, but when it comes to the love we receive, and share with others, it seems to me that this is something we can’t begin to measure out, or say is deserved, or not deserved.

Love seems to me to be a gift, the supreme gift, that trumps even cruelty, barbarity, and injustice. It ‘keeps no account of wrongdoing’, and it has the capacity to wipe the slate clean, so we can begin again. How can we even start to measure something like this? It is truly radical, and of another order altogether from what’s bargained back and forth in our so-common, selfish relationships. The love that is cultivated step by step, following its organic development, can reach the stage where even those who are inimical towards us are treated with kindness in return.

The term ‘enemies’, as in ‘love your enemies’, I think of these days as some pretty clever marketing, designed to get our attention. After all, if someone is our enemy, by definition, they are someone we don’t love, and probably even someone we hate back in turn. Isn’t that the way it is? It’s clear, after some reflection, this is saying that, from our side, not to have enemies. It’s about how we hold this person who is threatening, or abusing us, or someone we feel close to. Do we see them as evil? As irredeemable? Maybe we do if we have the notion of ‘unpardonable sin’, or ‘original sin’ or ‘eternal damnation’. In Buddhism though, the whole group of those who cause harm is viewed differently, and in a way that can be worked with much more effectively, for all our sake.

First, we don’t assert original sin, but rather original goodness, or purity, called in teachings called our Buddha Nature, or Divine Nature, that is the basis for the

potential for change. If we don't see this, or at least acknowledge it as a possibility, then those who are doing wrong will be seen as always being the way they are, with no chance of change. Then of course, what choice would we have other than to set ourselves in opposition to them forever? But seeing the potential for change, we're not so set in our attitude towards those who are doing harm. We're more optimistic, based on what's taught, and also something that we can know in ourselves.

Secondly, when dealing with the difficult person, the greed and anger people show comes from ignorance. They may be powerful, or in a position of authority, but they are no less playing out the very same dynamic we find in ourselves, and in those who give us a hard time in our every day lives. This doesn't mean we don't get out of their way, or defend ourselves or our loved ones, not by any means, but the whole context of what we are doing changes when we see these two points – that the harm people would cause comes from their ignorance, and, that this can change. Now we are ready, I think, for loving even our enemies, or those who or those who are hostile towards us.

I know it comes up so often as an example of how it is impossible to return good for harm, that it may illustrate the principles at work to use the example of what happened mid twentieth century, as the National Socialists in Germany set themselves against the entire Jewish people. The idea of these groups seem so set in our minds. The moral lessons that seem so clear cut to many often include the implied idea that it is impossible to love some individuals, or groups of people, and, in fact, it would be foolish to do so, and cruel to ask another to, as well.

These days, we can probably substitute the Jewish people and the Palestinians, or Klan members and blacks in the South in the 1960's, or the Japanese in China in the Second World War; the Tutsis and the Hutus in Rwanda, or the US military and the Native population here.

Looking back we can ask, in every case, have there been former Nazis or Klan members, or others who have changed their views, or regretted their actions? Haven't some racists overcome their prejudice?, We all know that some have, and, if this is so, then what does that tell us about all those who committed such crimes? Two things: *that they were deeply ignorant, and, that they had the potential for change.*

Ultimately not taking sides, there is hope for the future. How do you not take sides when good and evil are so obvious? You do it by regarding humanity as one; one in noble birth and heritage; one in our sacred destiny, or divine potential. The mind that sees this is far from the mind of racism, or class superiority, or exploitation, and this is exactly what is needed. It is true medicine, and sustenance for all our days.

In the end, looking back, what I can say is that ‘these are things that were done to the people of my own human family’, and ‘these are things that were done *by* the people of my same human family - ’ May everyone here awaken from such ignorance, and may I be a cause of that!

To dial it back some, because we can probably continue to judge the wrongdoers in history without an end to it, we can look at whatever instances of wrong have been done by our own country, by ourselves, or to ourselves.

Where does forgiveness in each case come from? It comes from understanding, and from the intention to move forward, knowing how much better we can be, and how much more we can do for one another, when our lives are based on what has true, eternal value, based, namely, on love.

In the book, *Mount Analogue*, the narrator says we should keep in mind the summit, the goal of our journey, while watching the step that is right in front of us, and that while keeping to the path, we shouldn’t lose sight of the goal.

The immediate principle in metta practice is that we start with whatever is easiest for us, and go on from there. There is another key piece to this, however, that that is, that we always start wherever we are just now. This gives us plenty of room for our difficulties, and is the most encouraging aspect of it for me. Such a high aim as universal love and compassion is achievable, and this should inspire us. On some days though, may we look up, or look at our own mind, or at the world we live in, and get discouraged at how far we are from any kind of ideal at all. This essential principle, of always starting from wherever we are now keeps us on course. We don’t get carried away if we seem to be making progress on some days, or dejected if we slow down, or stop or even seem to go of course for a while. I heard this phrase, that, when walking someplace, resting does not mean turning back.

I like very much that Jesus spoke of going beyond our own family, or clan, when developing our love. This is surely something that is possible, if we set ourselves to go in that direction. Step by step we can get there.

I feel a great enthusiasm when I so much as get a glimpse at this possibility. I try not to get too carried away with it, after all, since there is still so much to be done here. Still, once in a while, to go to the mountain top, to take in the great vista, and fill our lungs with clean air, this is something we will surely carry with us everywhere we go.

Metta, the Four Brahma Viharas, and Bodhicitta

Metta - The method of loving kindness practice

Introduction

There is a light in the mind when we love selflessly, no doubt about it. Love is what lets us see beauty. Delighting in others is a kind of enlightenment, we could say, and that light is sustenance; it brings happiness and well being to the heart and mind.

If you are interested in this as a formal Buddhist practice, one of my favorite books on the subject is still *Lovingkindness*, by Sharon Salzberg. I'm also very glad to be able to recommend the website called *dharmafeed*, which is a great treasure trove of audio talks on many aspects of Dharma practice.

What a time to be alive!

On the next pages you will find two versions of the Metta Sutta, the teaching on Loving Kindness taught by the Buddha, followed by two traditional methods for cultivating Metta, the second with some personal variations added, of course. They are essentially the same meditation.

The first method offered here I received in 1998, at a monastery in Thailand called Wat Asokaram, from a Western monk there named Phra Ingo. It uses a simple visualization.

The second method uses phrases to generate loving kindness, to guide the mind and keep it on track. These can be combined, of course, whatever works best.

Sometimes I feel like, 'enough with words!' At these times, just bringing an image to mind is enough to enjoy this meditation.

When we practice metta, we're doing something very simple. We're getting in touch with and awakening the heart's innate capacity for love. So there's no need to make it complicated, or to have any doubt that this is something we can all do.

Then, when it comes to using metta phrases for the cultivation of loving kindness, some teachers say that the fewer phrases the better, but this is something we can experiment with for ourselves, and see what works best for us.

Whatever method we use, I think Ajaan Pasanno explained the aim of metta practice very well when he said: ‘In reality, the cultivation of loving kindness is not the actual repeating of the words – I mean, you use those words and phrases, but it’s about the feeling, that feeling of loving kindness, the feeling of warmth, the feeling of acceptance, the feeling of openness, the feeling of the heart, including and concerned for the happiness of oneself or others, and that’s about generating the feeling.

‘In terms of meditation, it’s that – directing attention to the feeling, or emotion, that sense of kindness, *well-wishing*, and then finding ways to support that, and to shore that up, and allow that to become stable, and then to start to suffuse one’s own being, and then allowing that to spread out... and that requires mindfulness, and attention...’¹

However we approach it, this is such a worthwhile practice. Don’t you agree?

The Buddha taught that, ‘Having seen that all beings, like ourselves, have a desire for happiness, one methodically develops loving kindness for all beings.’

This Buddhist loving kindness practice naturally leads us to what are called The Four Brahma Viharas, or Divine Abidings, of Universal Love, Compassion, Delight in the good, and Peace and balance of mind born of the strength of dedication, also called Equanimity, so I’ve also included a few verses that express this.

Enjoy! May all beings benefit!

¹ From the recording of the 2008 Metta Retreat, available from Abhayagiri Monastery

The Metta Sutta

This is what should be done
By those who are skilled in goodness,
And who know the path of peace:

Let them be able and upright,
Straightforward and gentle in speech,
Humble and not conceited,
Contented and easily satisfied,
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways,
Peaceful and calm, and wise and skillful,
Not proud and demanding in nature.
Let them not do the slightest thing
That the wise would later reprove.

Wishing: in gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.

Whatever living beings there may be;
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,
The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to-be-born—
May all beings be at ease!

Let none deceive another,
Or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will
Wish harm upon another.

Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings;
Radiating kindness over the entire world,
Spreading upward to the skies,

And downward to the depths;
Outward and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.

Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down,
Free from drowsiness,
One should sustain this recollection.
This is said to be the sublime abiding.

By not holding to fixed views,
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
Being freed from all sense desires,
Is not born again into this world.

The Discourse On Love {Thich Nhat Hanh translation}

He or she who wants to attain peace should practice being upright, humble, and capable of using loving speech. He or she will know how to live simply and happily, with senses calmed, without being covetous and carried away by the emotions of the majority. Let him or her not do anything that will be disapproved of by the wise ones.

(And this is what he or she contemplates:)

May everyone be happy and safe, and may their hearts be filled with joy. May all living beings live in security and in Peace - beings who are frail or strong, tall or short, big or small, visible or not visible, near or far away, already born or yet to be born. May all of them dwell in perfect tranquility. Let no one do harm to anyone. Let no one put the life of anyone in danger. Let no one, out of anger or ill will, wish anyone any harm.

Just as a mother loves and protects her only child at the risk of her own life, we should cultivate Boundless Love to offer to all living beings in the entire cosmos. We should let our boundless love pervade the whole universe, above, below and across. Our love will know no obstacles, our heart will be absolutely free from hatred and enmity. Whether standing or walking, sitting or lying, as long as we are awake, we should maintain this mindfulness of love in our own heart. This is the noblest way of living.

Free from wrong views, greed and sensual desires, living in beauty and realizing perfect understanding, those who practice Boundless Love will certainly transcend Birth and Death.

Metta Bhavana - Loving Kindness Meditation

To begin with, I sit upright, and relax. I close my eyes and allow myself to settle, becoming more calm, relaxed and harmonious.

I let go of thoughts, feelings, and sensations.

I observe how the breath is flowing in smoothly, and flowing out easily; free and harmonious.

Now I see a wonderful sun over my head, shining with warm, golden light.

This bright light of loving-kindness is streaming throughout my entire being. I can feel it; I feel well, and I am happy.

I. First person: Now I imagine one person who I love the most.

I see the warm, golden light of loving-kindness streaming to that person.

This wonderful bright light is flowing through this person. This beloved person is surrounded by this light of higher love and kindness.

I can see the smile on their face. This beloved person feels well, and is very happy.

II. Second person: Next, I imagine one person who I like and respect.
... (as above)

III. Third person: Next I can see one person toward whom I have a neutral relationship. ... (as above)

IV. Fourth person: The last person I think of is one whom I have had difficulties, or someone who I dislike. ... (as above)

Now I see all four persons together, with the sun above them, and I see them all

receiving the same amount of this warm golden light of loving-kindness.

They all feel well; they are all smiling, and they are all shining, and happy.

Then I let them go I peace and happiness.

Now, once more I see the warm sun above my head, and once again I am filled with feelings of happiness and well-being.

(optional:)

If necessary, at this point, I practice equanimity meditation:

Now, I allow myself to feel calm, and peaceful.

To conclude, I take a deep breath, and exhale slowly. I come back to the here and the now, and slowly open my eyes.

May all beings be happy.

Metta - loving kindness practice

Traditionally, metta practice is first done toward oneself. Then one cultivates metta for one's parents, family, friends and benefactors, including teachers, to neutral ones, or those we don't know, seen and unseen by us, to those we've had some difficulty with, and then to all beings. The general principle is that we start with what is easy, and go from there, and that we go patiently, and gradually.

In general, fewer words are better, but we should have a clear idea of what the words we use mean to us. For different people or groups, different lines may seem more appropriate to reflect on. You're welcome to select from these, to use lines from other sources, or to write your own metta phrases. Sometimes one or two lines are enough. Here is a model. Use your intelligence and skill to adapt meditation, as you see fit. The feeling is the important thing, and the clear intention.

Phrases for metta loving kindness practice

Here are two versions of the traditional phrases that are used:

May they be happy
 May they be healthy
 May they be peaceful
 May they live with ease

...

May they be safe
 May they be healthy
 May they be happy
 May they know they are loved

....

Ani Tenzin Palmo offers this way of expressing metta that has a very nice rhythm to it:

May they be well and happy,
 peaceful, and at their ease.

The following was offered by Ajaan Pasanno. Beginning with oneself, it can be adapted to the different categories of people.

May I (they) be well, happy, peaceful, and prosperous.

May no harm come to me (them, etc...)

May no difficulties come to me.

May no problems come to me.

May I always meet with spiritual success.

May I also have the patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.

May I have the qualities that will allow me to see those through.

...

And here are my own phrases:

May they be entirely well and at their ease.

May they have every happiness.

May they always be safe and protected

May they always know themselves to be greatly loved and cared for

May their heart be open to all the beauty and wonder of life.

May they have all they need and wish for

May they have every blessing

May they have all of the good things that this life has to offer,
every success and all joys.

May they have happiness

May they be healthy

May they have peace,

happiness and harmony in all their relationships

May they know freedom,

the highest happiness, and fulfillment.

As I mentioned earlier, you can also write your own metta phrases – and I encourage you to do so. Make the practice your own. These are just offered as an example. You are welcomed to use whatever works best for you.

Two more traditional methods

There are many ways to develop loving kindness. Two more ways that have come down to us are the spatial extension of metta, and developing metta for different categories of people. In each case, we are aiming to gradually become more inclusive in our love.

In the spatial extension of metta, we begin with where we are physically, and extend goodwill in front of us, to the left and right, in all directions, step by step, further and further, as much as we like and feel comfortable doing. We can begin where we are sitting and extend the light of metta to those in our own room, household, building, block, neighborhood, city, state, country, continent, hemisphere, world, universe, and beyond....

Another, simple application of the spatial extension of metta can be when we look from our window, we can extend well-wishing to the people we see pass by in the street. When we go out, we can offer metta to those on public transportation, or in line at the grocery store, or to a room of people, such as at work, at the bank, at the doctor's, or at a bar, genuinely wishing them all well.

In developing metta for different categories of people, we have a model in the suttas, and we are encouraged to be creative with it as well. We can develop kindness and well wishing for the young and old, for the rich and poor, for those near and far away; for the happy and the troubled in spirit; for those living in ease, comfort and safety, and those in difficult circumstances, and so on. We can develop this quality of care and support for people of different political views, and for those of different races, for different species and stages of development, and those who live in other worlds. Truly, there is no limit to its application.

The Four Brahma Viharas

Metta practice is done step by step, through the different categories, understanding their purpose, and then all together, as taught, until one reaches the Four 'Brahma Viharas' – the 'Divine Abodes', also called the Four Limitless States. These are

Universal Love, Compassion, Joy, and Equanimity, which in this context is the strength and balance of mind that comes from love.

The Four Brahma Viharas can be expressed, and reflected on in a number of ways, including this four line prayer, adapted from the Tibetan Tradition:

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

May all beings be free of suffering and the causes of suffering...

*I rejoice in all that is beautiful and right in the world,
in all virtue and positive action,
and in all happiness and good fortune...*

and abide in stable, impartial love...

{My own versions of the traditional teachings, “The Cultivation of Loving Kindness’, and ’The Suffusion with the Divine Abidings’ follow.}

The Cultivation of Loving Kindness

Having seen that like oneself
all beings seek for happiness,
one patiently then cultivates love for all beings

May I be happy, healthy, and peaceful
May I be free from suffering

May my family, friends, co-workers,
neutral ones, and those who are difficult
have every happiness
May they be free from all suffering
May they be free from all danger, and all difficulty

Within the boundaries of this town,
may all beings have happiness
Likewise those in other places,
in other cities, and countries,
in all places,
may they all have happiness, health and peace

All creatures and all breathing things,
all persons and all entities...
men, women and children,
the Noble Ones, the unawake,
Devas, and unhappy ones
who in the ten directions dwell -

*May all beings be happy and at peace,
and may their hearts be filled with joy!*

Suffusion with the Divine Abidings

{I. Loving Kindness}

I will abide
pervading the world
with loving-kindness,
all around and everywhere,
and to all as to myself

I will abide
pervading this all encompassing world
with loving-kindness,
abundant, exalted, immeasurable,

with unconditional love,
warmth, gentleness,
gratitude,
appreciation and respect,
supreme well-wishing,
and encouragement for all

May all beings be happy,
May they be healthy,
May they dwell in safety, comfort and peace,
May they all know they are loved

I will abide
pervading the world
with loving-kindness -

May all beings be entirely well
and at their ease!

From the insects on the ground,
to the birds in the trees and in the sky,
the fish in the waters,
animals,
and people everywhere,

young and old,
 rich and poor,
 weak and strong,
 male and female,
 realized and ordinary people,
 near and far away,
 already born and yet to be born –
 May they all be entirely well
 and at their ease!

All around and everywhere,
 and to all as to myself –
 May all have supreme happiness,
 health, and peace!
 May they all know they are loved

I will abide
 pervading this all encompassing world
 with loving-kindness,
 abundant, exalted, immeasurable,

with unconditional good-will,
 warmth, gentleness,
 gratitude,
 appreciation and respect,
 supreme well-wishing,
 and encouragement for all

{II. Compassion}

I will abide
 pervading the world
 with compassion,
 all around and everywhere,
 and to all as to myself

I will abide
 pervading this all encompassing world
 with compassion,

abundant, exalted, immeasurable,

with a heart of complete solidarity with all those who suffer in any way,
and with engagement with them

young and old,
rich and poor,
weak and strong,
male and female,
realized and ordinary people,
near and far away,
already born and yet to be born –
May they all be free from all their suffering,
and the causes of suffering
May they all be healed
May they all be completely safe and protected

I will abide with compassion,
courage, joy,
and real strength

{III. Joy}

I will abide
pervading the world
with a heart that rejoices in the good,
everywhere it is found,
in the arts,
in the natural world,
in children,
in myself and in others,
in teachers, and in healers,
in kind and caring people,
in cherished elders, ancestors,
family and friends

I will abide
pervading this all encompassing world
with joy and celebration

abundant, exalted, immeasurable

{IV. The Strength and Peace of love, born of dedication, also known as its
Equanimity}

I will abide
pervading the world
with stable, impartial love,
all around and everywhere,
and to all as to myself

With all people
and in every circumstance,
steadfast, loyal,
courageous, and reliable,
with love's own equanimity,
peace and strength

I will abide
pervading the all encompassing world
with this stable, impartial love,
abundant, exalted, immeasurable,

at all times with a heart,
that is steady, and joyful,
even, and serene

The Four Brahma Viharas and Bodhicitta – The Thought of Enlightenment

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

May all beings be free of suffering and the causes of suffering...

I rejoice in all happiness and good fortune ...

And abide in stable, impartial love...

With an understanding of the Four Noble Truths, and the possibility of liberation, the love that is developed to the point of becoming what are called the Limitless States, of Great Universal Love, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy and Equality of View, or Impartiality, naturally becomes bodhicitta, which is the dedication to helping others through one's practice and accomplishment of the path.

Thinking:

May I always cherish all my loved ones
with the determination to myself accomplish for them the highest good
that is more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel

(Verse one of the Eight Verses for Training the Mind)

This is like eating, so that one can feed others; like stepping onto the shore of freedom, in order to help others to safety; taking medicine, and *becoming* medicine so that one can heal others. This is done with the aim to provide for them all that they need and wish for. *May this motivation, uncontrived, unfabricated, arise in my being*

May the supreme jewel, bodhicitta,
arise where it has not arisen,
Where it has arisen, may it not diminish,
May it ever grow and flourish

Verses for Refuge and generating bodhicitta

For the sake of all who are struggling and suffering,
those who have not attained the highest state of freedom and peace,

to relieve their suffering and bring them happiness,

I take refuge in the Buddha,
the Great Compassionate Teacher,
I take refuge in the Dharma,

in all the Liberating Teachings,
and I take refuge in the Sangha,
the Spiritual Community

By this practice,

just as my teachers before me have done,
with Wisdom,
May I realize the state of Peace,
Perfect Freedom, happiness,
and Great Love, ~ the Mind of Enlightenment,

and share that with all
May all benefit

{The concerns of others are my concerns,
is that not so?

For their sake, then}

May I accomplish this Path,

and,

May all temporal and ultimate aims be fulfilled

or, more briefly:

For the sake of all beings,
I take refuge in the Three Jewels

By this practice, may I realize perfect freedom and happiness

and share that with all

May all beings benefit

May I accomplish this path
and

May all temporal and ultimate aims be fulfilled

The Traditional Verse for Taking Refuge and generating bodhicitta is

*I take refuge,
until I attain enlightenment,
in the Buddha,
the Dharma, and the Supreme Assembly
By the merit I have accumulated
through Generosity and other Virtues, may I accomplish Buddhahood
for the sake of all beings*

Part II. The Bodhisattva Vow and Thought Training Teachings

The Thought of Enlightenment

To Embrace Collective Action

Freedom of Mind - the Root of the Social Gospel

On the Nature of Vow, and the Bodhisattva Vow

The Bodhisattva Thought Training Teachings

A Summary of the Stages of the Path Teachings, with notes

The Thought of Enlightenment

I imagine a community gathering of compassionately motivated people; different groups are represented, all voicing their views, all needing to be heard: there are those who advocate for the homeless, those who stand up for animal rights, others raising their voices with urgency to protect our shared environment; some speak for the need for greater visibility of the poor, and working class; some speak out against endless corporate greed and the endemic corruption of politicians; others, against war, and nuclear weapons; and still others on the issues of fundamental human rights; somehow, these are not entirely discordant, they don't completely clash and drown each other out;

I can imagine with all the heat in that meeting place, a lull where someone stands up and says, 'What about enlightenment?' I think if we don't bring this into it, we're missing something crucial to our survival, and flourishing. Every week, really every day, the news underscores the need for us to think differently, and to think more deeply and creatively.

'I mean, we 're all gathered here wanting substantial changes in the systems we live in, not wanting to settle for mere deceptive, cosmetic changes, so why not address the foundations of ignorance, hostility and greed that are the common roots of the problems we're up against?'

Without this, if people care at all, often they just go from the extreme of reactive, passionate emotion, to that of depression about our world, when something more is needed. We can do better. In fact, we have to do better than that.

Almost right away, a self proclaimed radical in the group will say, 'We don't need any more religion – religions are the problem!'

Good point. I'm not talking here about religions either, but wisdom and compassion.

How capable are we of sustained involvement with the suffering and the institutions we want to change? How many of us at times have felt we lack for resources, material and spiritual, to do our work here?

‘Describe what you mean by enlightenment! It sounds like a savior-guru ego trip, catching people up in a mindless fervor – divorced from hard realities, and irresponsibly pinning our hopes on agencies outside ourselves. Spell out what you mean, man!’

Right on all counts – all the shadow sides of what religious traditions have been, and still are in a lot of places have to be seen for what they are, and renounced. That’s not what I’m talking about at all.

What I’m talking about here as a greater enlightenment is getting free of our misconceptions, of our limited and limiting conceptions, of ourselves, of others, and our world; of really knowing our own depth and value, and that naturally of others and this planet; and of having greater access to resources of strength, intelligence, courage and love where it’s needed most;

‘If we wait for that, the world as we know it will have collapsed, taking you and everyone you so self-righteously claim to love with you! Ech! I don’t have time for this, and neither do you!’

I’m not talking about anything far away, though some people may want to spend their whole life looking to understand things more deeply. And more power to them, I say. What I’m talking about here though is simply a greater awakening, that we’re all capable of, a deepening of insight that can serve us well in days to come. There are degrees of awakening, and any of them would be a help to us now.

‘Aw - Pop-psychobabble!’, said a priest who had come to the front of the group. ‘Where is God in all this I hear about ‘degrees of awakening’, and ‘being a little more kind’? Leave out the might of the Creator and it’s a weak, watered down, ego centric pseudo religion, that leaves us worse off than before.’

Well, Reverend, you have a point, but, believe it or not, not everyone can relate to your church, and its metaphors. You have your own means, but we need all the approaches to solving our problems we can get our hands on. Isn’t it so?

What I’m saying applies to you here also – you know, not everyone who claims to be Christian goes deep with it. What I’m calling enlightenment applies to them also – in their case, it would be a Christian enlightenment, and one that we would all be better off because of.

Imagine if all those people who called themselves Christian, or followers of the teachings of Jesus, actually practiced what he taught- it would be a far different world than what we have now. Instead people settle for what institutions dish up as their version of religion, and then don't go any deeper than that. It's often divisive, claiming to be the only way to truth, excluding everyone who doesn't agree with one narrow interpretation.

Another thing – I don't think we can begin to measure the value of one – even slightly more realized - person for our community; one with even a little more vision, we know, is a great help – how much more so someone with real wisdom, far-sightedness and compassion? Such people do exist, and we only need to look for them to find this is so.

What I'd like to advocate is a deeper understanding of our own chosen tradition, whatever that may be, until we touch universal water, our common humanity and bond with all life, and then thinking, speaking, acting and teaching from that.

An Orthodox Buddhist spoke up and said, 'You water down what Enlightenment is – and that's not what the Great Teacher pointed to. The scriptures are very clear about this. Not every path leads to the same goal – so why are you muddying the waters with all this universalist new age sounding talk about just having more of what we know as ordinary wisdom and compassion being the goal? It's a little too touchy feeling for my likes- the 'everyone let's just get along' message, which unfortunately is not enough, not nearly enough...'

Friend, I think you limit even your own religion to say there's only one way – and that other paths couldn't possibly lead to the freedom and capacity of the Founder of your religion. I, myself, don't subscribe to that belief – it's too narrow for me, and goes against the evidence of there being saints, as in - highly realized beings - in all traditions of the world, as well as unassociated with traditions at all.

Another spoke up, and said, 'But isn't it selfish, with so much going on, to just go off somewhere and reflect?'

You're right that we need to keep a sense of our commitments. But we also have to think carefully about how we're going to respond. If we just act out of emotion, we could miss a chance to do something really effective, and plant the seeds of change.

Ani Tenzin Palmo said something that comes to mind here. She said, ‘The best thing you can do for the world is to recognize and develop your innate wisdom’, and I have to agree with her. There’s nothing selfish about that at all. In fact, this is so important, for all of our sakes.

‘What about methods then?’, someone else asked. ‘I mean, deeper realization sounds good and all, but what is the way? Hasn’t this been asked for ages, and look at where we still are – I don’t need to tell you...’

The methods have been there forever, what’s lacking has been the willingness to pick up on them. Sometimes a crisis will drive people to religion, or to teachers, but that kind of emotional motivation only gets us to the door of the temple, or church. Better to think this through carefully and then act.

Think about it: If what we really need is a greater depth of understanding, of ourselves in our confusion and in times when we are right; if this is what we really need for the more substantial changes we all want to see to have a firm foundation here, then we can start to seriously look for what methods suit us individually, and then to faithfully, and devotedly apply themselves to them.

This is something we should think about, just this possibility.

To Embrace Collective Action

The willingness to engage in collective action arises in a person only when they see that individual efforts are not enough. Before that, they may labor under the illusion that our own personal recycling, or refusing to support Nike, Nestle, Arrowhead Water, McDonalds, Monsanto, Exxon or Shell Oil is sufficient, morally and practically, to change the course of malevolent corporate greed.

An analogy I can get my head around on my better days runs like this: we're all on a boat, and are each having some effect on the boat taking on water. I may stop my part of it, but if the people to my left and right all down the line continue to flood the boat, we're all going down together.

Seeing the need for collective action, my responsibility then becomes not only to stop my part in the destruction of the only vessel we have, and that we all depend on, but to convince enough of the others to do the same. I find right here the moral obligation to proselytize – not in the sense of narrow minded, dogmatic, religious types, but as a passionate activist would: to advocate, agitate, to motivate others, to seek light and share it widely, and to encourage others to do the same.

It may not be that everyone needs to be convinced to give up what is a callous, indifferent, or destructive lifestyle – destructive not only for them, but for us all – it would be enough to turn a critical mass to face these truths and to change their actions.

Global issues usually are too much to grasp as anything more than abstract ideas, but I saw a graph recently that really hit home. It charts the rate of humans' use of fossil fuels, and the unsustainable rise in CO₂ in a very short period of time. Looking forward, this kind of consumption is not viable for us as a species, for our children and grandchildren. Seeing that graphic, at least for a time, was enough to tip the balance for me to understand: changing my behavior alone would be nowhere near enough. Unless there is a collective awakening we are all going to suffer. Unless we change our thinking and actions as a group, we are headed for a cataclysmic self-extinction of our species, as well as the destruction of many other forms of life on this earth.

I bring this same feeling of personal responsibility with me to social causes: the systemic exploitation of the poor; the thriving of an upper class while millions

don't have even the most basic necessities; the usurpation of political power here and abroad. In each case I can feel that my own view and relatively small action is next to nothing compared to the extent of the transformation that is needed in people's hearts and in their actions, and I feel the ethical obligation to provoke change in the greatest possible number of people. Anything less and I've not really accomplished anything other than my own gaining a small bit of clarity. Practically speaking, there will be little to no effect. I have a responsibility to you and to everyone, and you and each person also has a responsibility to everyone else. This is called doing one's part.

What is called "bodhicitta" in Buddhism is the intention to take care of oneself as well as we can so that we can best care for others. It is the expression of the sense of responsibility for all others. An essential feature in this bodhicitta is the idea that through training, or self cultivation, a human being can become free of the root causes of suffering for us personally and collectively - greed, aggression, fear and despair, and not just temporarily, but in such a way that these factors in the psyche are removed from within us, never to rise up again. For this reason, bodhicitta is sometimes referred to as "the thought of enlightenment".

This is the best gift one can offer to the world, the best way to integrate taking care of oneself, and contributing to others vision, strength, verified faith and courage. I lose the thread again and again, overwhelmed by the news of the world, and by my own faults, but I know enough by now to go looking for this key again.

They say that when something is true and you investigate it, it becomes a deeper realization. The more I think about the role of the individual and just how much one person can do, compared to the vast needs that exist, the more I'm convinced that waking up, freeing myself thoroughly, and enabling others to do the same is what is called for. Here is the noble, sustaining ideal. When such wisdom and compassion and understanding come together, more and more, this becomes the aim and the fulfillment of our being here.

Freedom of Mind – the Root of the Social Gospel

for Dr. David Hilfiker, by Jason Espada

‘We belong to each other’

I. The social gospel defined

The social gospel is the view that we are made to care for each other; that we are here to protect, support and encourage each other; to love, nurture and celebrate every one of our family, from birth, through all the stages of life, in struggle and difficulty, and in times of ease and success.

That this orientation to our whole life sometimes rises in a person, in different times and places and cultures, independent of religion, tells me that this capacity is something fundamental to us as human beings. There’s something in us that can be tapped into that precedes organized religion. Religions can foster a social gospel, or, remarkably, they can get in the way, but what’s happening when this ethic towards the whole of life arises in a person, whether it is facilitated by a Tradition, or not, I would suggest, is the same.

II. Its cause

Everything we see people doing has roots in their inner life – whether there’s anger or gentleness, greed or generosity, distorted views or wisdom and respect – it’s always the case that what we see reveals what’s in a person, or group of people. This is true right up to what we call mass movements, such as militarism, or in economics.

The same holds true of the social gospel - it comes to be, and is sustained in people by causes, the chief of these being inner freedom. By this I mean something more exact than a pleasant feeling, or being able to do as one pleases. Inner freedom, as it’s understood by contemplatives everywhere, entails much more than that. It refers to a mind, or a spirit free of greed, of aggression, and of delusion regarding ourselves, those we share this life with, and our world. Such freedom, that has wisdom and virtue as its nature, is always what has made it possible for a person to think of others and act to on their behalf.

III. What is then born

On a group level, when enough people together gain a clarity of vision and conscience, works are set in motion that make for real changes in society. It can start with one, or a few people, but eventually many are brought into the work. Witness the changes brought by the civil rights, labor, or women's movements. All these came about because there was an availability and an awakening in a number of people's hearts, and that they in their turn awakened and empowered others, lifting them to higher levels.

IV. Inclusive compassion

Some people wonder out loud how Mahayana Buddhism came into being, historically, with its emphasis on all inclusive compassion. I can tell you that I think it happened because the methods taught by Shakyamuni worked to free enough people from their afflictions and self preoccupation that empathy and active compassion were naturally born in them.

The Thai teacher Ajaan Lee said, 'The mind at normalcy is the substance of virtue'. This has been talked about by others over time in different ways: as an Edenic state, as our own original nature revealed, full of grace.

Our humanity, when it is healthy, sane, and flourishing, is naturally inclusive. It reaches out. As long as one person is still confused, and don't know their own worth, they they will create suffering for themselves and for others, and so we have to take care of each other, to the fullest extent, including everyone. And as s Dr. King expressed it, 'No one is free until every last one of us is free'. This is only common sense - drawing out the ethic of love to its logical conclusion.

At the most basic level, as Shantideva taught, we should remove suffering simply because it is suffering, and care for others just because it's the right thing to do. Seeing this, teachers in the past encouraged us to know the great value of freedom of mind in terms of the whole group, of every life.

V. To know that Freedom of mind is attainable

That we don't need to be caught in suffering and a narrow perspective is remarkable news. For someone who hasn't heard it before, it may be hard to believe, but right there is the proposition. As for myself, my esteem for those who

teach and vividly demonstrate that this is possible for us only increases as time goes on. Without them, we'd only have a story someone told once in a book, that we would then need to argue over. And so I pay homage to Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Bokar Rinpoche, Lama Yeshe, Ajaan Lee and the Thai Forest teachers, Thomas Merton, Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, Mother Teresa, and the sages who demonstrate by their good works in our world that they have found what has real meaning.

How do we know if the roots of a tree are in touch with living water? We can see it in the broad shade of their branches, and in their fruits – which are abundant, rich, and life sustaining to us all. And so it is with people in this world.

VI. What we all need

Whether or not we're part of a tradition, what we all need is the same, and that is to meet and engage this world in a way that is not confused or afflicted, and, with that as the ground, with a natural heart full of love, to help one another as much as we can.

We may think it's possible to engage the world and make a difference without much freedom of mind, but we can see where egotism and immaturity have gotten us, individually and collectively. Look at how indifference, neglect, indulgence, exploitation, consumerism, boredom and despair manifest - these show our values, and the state of our inner life. Clearly, something else entirely is needed.

Despite the fact that some measure of freedom of mind and humane values are within reach, what do we see when we look at how most people in this country spend their time and resources? So many Americans in the twenty first century eat, and over eat, drink, consume, use entertainments to escape, and rely on anti depressants like never before. So many of them are just focussed and closed in on themselves.

All these signs of narrow mindedness, to me, point to a widespread lack of inner freedom, and the acknowledgement and respect for others that it necessarily brings. As it is now, a lot of how we live in this country, in terms of the impact we are having as a consumer society, what we do and leave undone, has to do with people's stresses, appetites, and attachments, but these can and do change.

What we need then for the social gospel to become a reality is more of a collective awakening, with more and more people becoming free of their lesser views and motivations.

Is there any other way? We're all in this together, and so one or two or a few dozen, or a few groups of people getting there is not enough. The few more awakened and free people can be like leaven in bread, but it's clear that the whole lot of us is what we need to influence. We should aim to reach as many people as we can, for all our sake.

VII. Continuing the work

I look to anyone who is actively engaged in some form of peace, or social justice work, and I ask: what do they have that others don't? – and I see, they have a vision; and of those who continue the work, rather than fall away from it – what do *they* have? They have maintained a connection with the view and power they've found, whatever name they give it, either with the help of traditions, or individually. Activists very often will leave this step out - they do their work until they have no more to give. Their mistake is in not knowing how to replenish their own sources of inspiration.

Out of people's vision for what is possible here comes their action, and whenever there's a sustained, useful involvement with others, it means that a person has been able to keep a powerful sense of what motivates them. Whatever our methods, of prayer, or meditation, or solitude, then, we all need to foster that connection to our positive vision and source of strength. There's nothing selfish about this, in fact, this is for everyone's sake.

VIII. The Great Clear Mirror

With the coming of the internet, what is in us as human beings, in terms of our values, is now even more clear. I remember when computers first became a little more widely available. There was the expression 'garbage in, garbage out', to point up the fact that the tools we use are only as powerful as we make them, that they are only as great as our motivation, they go just as far as our vision. The internet then, is a great clear mirror to our inner life.

Now, more than ever, we can become aware of, and engage with this world of ours. It's remarkable, really, and will only continue to evolve in new ways. Whether this

interaction is meaningful, however, or negligent, or exploitive, all depends on who we are inside, on what is in us as a motivating force. No one would argue - great things are possible like never before, and because of our increased interdependence, now, more than ever, we are in need of a social gospel, a life giving vision.

IX. Teaching the choices we have

What if, then, from grade school on, boys and girls, young men, women, and adults were taught that anger and greed were something that can and should be lessened, and removed entirely? This goes beyond what any one religion says – it's stating something basic about who we are as human beings, and what we're capable of, that we can choose this as a basis for our life here.

What if, more and more, people had living examples of freedom and virtue in their teachers, and were shown how becoming free of anger, greed, and egotism is possible by a person working with their own minds and hearts?

We can imagine, it would have far reaching effects. It would birth a different world. And nothing less than this is what is needed now, more than in any other time that's come before. We are in need of a wide-scale work.

X. With a view to our future together

I find inspiration in the idea of a culture having, or moving toward an ethic – such as that of respect and care of their elders. This reaches beyond ethics – plural, to having a stable basis in a culture, that then expresses itself in a number of ways.

I would say that what we need in America, and in the world now, most of all, is *an ethic* of compassion, even if it takes some generations to bring into being. This is different from advocating one or two, or a handful of causes, such as universal health care, affordable housing, and education. It is more the ground from which these are addressed. And that ethic, in turn, has *its* unmistakable cause. When enough of us are liberated, naturally, a compassionate society will follow. And this is where I find hope.

On the Nature of Vow, and the Bodhisattva Vow

Vow is an interesting word, a rich word. It has connotations of a depth of commitment; and of something solemn, and serious; a deep dedication that calls up our resources and aims them all in a single direction.

This word can also be a mirror – as in - What is your vow? People can ‘vow’ to do all sorts of things, as a reflection of who they are, what they believe, what they hold to be of ultimate importance, for example, young people vowing to become a millionaire before the age of 30, or vowing to lose weight, or to never again subject themselves to a destructive relationship.

Then there are those people who don’t feel any real commitment to anything other than their own happiness, and of course conflict with others has to come from that. Some people don’t feel any dedication to something larger than themselves, but one way or another, this is something we all need. We are all related, so even looking at it from the point of view of our own happiness, we do need some positive motivation regarding others, and the world we live in.

Vow galvanizes our aim

Taking a positive motivation one step further, we come to vow. Whereas being inclined to help is a great thing, vow has more focus, and more power. Forming our intention then helps us to see clearly what is getting in the way of our aims, and helps us to clear away those obstacles. It affirms that we know our place in the world, and it breathes fresh life into us. Vow calls up energy we never knew we had, and strengthens us.

Vow is not fanaticism

The only thing that can possibly keep vow from becoming fanaticism, is reason. What we commit ourselves to should be the result of a great deal of reflection. When instead there is a small amount of reason, and a whole lot of emotion, the results are something tyrannical, unbalanced and destructive – witness all the great evils in history and you’ll see, they all had a fanatic ideology at their base.

Ideally, the vows we make should be based on illumined reason, the kind that is the product of deep and careful thought, and reasoning that can stand up to investigation and questioning.

I've heard a traditional teaching about the place of reason that says, if something is true or worthwhile then the more you look into it, the more apparent that truth becomes; and if something is not true, then examining it will remove that wrong idea. This is like seeing a rope at night in the dark and thinking it is a snake – if we take a closer look, the mistaken concept will disappear.

If we are dedicated to something that is really worthwhile, on the other hand, then thinking about it will only increase the energy we have to carry out our aim. This is how it should be.

Vow can only come from oneself

When we look within our own heart and hold the question: what should I do with my life in this world? in time, an answer will come that will be our own. Such a sense of direction and commitment can't be given to us. Although such things as outer ceremonies and readings can strengthen our sense of direction and can help our courage to grow, the initial impulse can't come to us from the outside. It has to be 'self-born'. We can say that vow is the flower of self knowledge. The advantage to this is that a clear decision we make about our life is truly our own. It can't be given, and no one can take it from us. Once we've had some experience of it, whatever clear sense of purpose we've had can be a reference point. Then, when things get uncertain, as they are bound to sometimes, we can, once more, orient ourselves to that.

Not easy

In all of us there is something called habit energy. By itself, habit is a neutral thing – it can work either for or against our wishes. If we're talking about actualizing an ideal however, almost certainly there are going to be things inside us and in the outside world that feel like they oppose our aims. This is natural and nothing to be afraid of or shy away from. In fact, we can say that the river of our intention flows by itself, but the path to actualizing this aim is made up of gradually removing the obstacles.

If we have clear aims, then naturally we will know what to do and what not to do. There is a perception that opens up that leads us to knowing what is most necessary at any time.

Vow strengthens us, clearing the way, first in our own thinking, and then in its outward expression; based on reason, it holds up where trust alone can get lost. Thinking on those things that are really worth committing to will prove to us their worth over and over. The more we stay with it, the better it becomes – the clearer our vision and the more abundant our courage. There is a kind of peace and strength to vows that is nourishing. We all need something of this kind of foresight, knowing the value of our goals. This is what helps when, over the long periods of time, no apparent result can be seen. We don't give up. We know what we have set ourselves to do is worth every effort we can give to it.

Steady

When we know from inside what truly matters to us, it makes for stability in our character. Like a tree with deep roots, we'll be much less at the mercy of outside forces, like income level, or what is current in our culture, changes in our relationships, or other people's opinions.

Vow functions to make our own priorities appear clearly to our mind. More and more, when we have a strong sense of our personal vows, we will find we have things in a perspective that makes sense to us. Little things won't bother us as much, and we will appreciate the big, important things, and at least aim to give them the care and attention they deserve.

The words are not the thing itself

Repeated words, as in a liturgy, all by themselves are not vow. If they are gone through mindlessly, they don't help much, if at all. The ideal with words is when writing and reading, and then reflecting on our truest aims can help us to touch that force in our lives that moves us forward. This can certainly help to increase that power in our lives. We should be clear though, that the words are not the thing itself - that's where idolatry comes from – regarding something that is essentially inside us as being separate from our own nature.

When we are able to increase the clarity, depth and power of feeling of dedication to our ideal, that can help to pacify and eventually transform the elements in our lives that obstruct what we aim for.

Will all the hypocrites in the room please raise their hand?

Vows are like a mirror. We can, and should feel uncomfortable when we realize we have fallen short of our ideal. This feeling of discomfort is actually a good thing. Until we have worked through all of our psychology, we will have inconsistencies between our best thought and our behavior. Some people would use the harsh term 'hypocrite', but this only applies if we are not honest, with ourselves primarily, about where we diverge. We need a vast amount of compassion for ourselves, for our suffering and struggle, and we need awareness. Then our vows can gradually help us to live whole, integrated lives.

The heart of the heart

The human heart was made to love. That is its' fulfillment, and that is the shining sun of its enduring nature that we can know in our lives each day. However much we are able to help today, having the highest aim, to help one another as much as we can, this greatly simplifies our complex, worried lives, and makes them so much easier, a delight, really. This one great aim can give to us all, strength and spiritual health. It is this that gives life to our life.

Freedom and service

The more freedom we have from suffering, the more available we are to be aware of and to respond to the needs of others. You can't expect someone who is suffering to try to help anyone except himself. But if even a little freedom is gained, with it comes some ability and naturally greater responsibility.

One analogy I have is, when a parent leaves the children at home, and the older sibling can see and reach the food on the shelf, when the younger ones cannot. That older brother or sister, because they can see and reach the soup or cereal, has a responsibility to help feed his brothers and sisters. It is that way naturally. If the mother were to come home and the kids had not been fed, she'd rightly blame the older child if he didn't do what he could have.

When I think of my family, friends, and myself, I know we each have difficulties to work through, and that sometimes we are not available for each other. Thankfully, at least most of the time I have some people who are available to offer their support.

The Bodhisattva Vow

There is a way of orienting ourselves to the world that many people over time have found to be greatly life-affirming. Based on universal love and compassion, and understanding the source of problems and their resolution, it is the intention to help others as much as possible. Included in that intention is freeing ourselves from whatever would keep us from offering such service. In traditional Buddhist language, the dedication to help others with both wisdom and compassion is called ‘the Bodhisattva Vow’. Bodhisattva means, literally ‘an awakening being’.

There are ceremonies for taking the Bodhisattva vow, but the true vow comes from our own heart. When we have this motivation, it is a breakthrough, no matter how many times it happens. It’s the dawning of a new awareness.

Finding the Bodhisattva vow in ourselves, re-affirming and strengthening that can give a person much courage and energy for their whole life. It clarifies everything, and helps us to have a feeling for our place in this world.

When we hear the cries of the world, we must be engaged -
Mahayana Buddhism

The term ‘Maha-yana’ in Mahayana Buddhism means ‘Great Vehicle’, and this refers to the aim, to work for the benefit of all. Being Buddhist in origin, the Bodhisattva vow includes the thought of enlightenment. In this Tradition, the cause of our many problems is seen as ignorance, and the remedy is wisdom, or insight, which taken to its furthest point, is enlightenment. The vow is then taken to cultivate the highest wisdom, and to lead each and every one to that same state. Quite the expression of love, compassion and understanding of what we all need!

Two Traditional Verses

In the Zen Tradition, the Mahayana motivation takes the form of the Four Great 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

If we are able to maintain compassion for others, then there will naturally be produced in our mind a certain kind of intention for our whole life.

What is called in the tradition *bodhicitta*, or *bodhimind*, or the awakening mind, is the whole-function, powerful intention to liberate our own mind from confusion and suffering, and to actualize or bring forth all beneficial, necessary qualities, so that we can best serve others.

In traditional terms, bodhicitta is made of love and compassion, and is the wish to become a Buddha for the benefit of all sentient beings. That mind itself, that thought, is a holy mind, a holy, profound and sacred thought, bringing only good into the world.

A person who lives to serve others is called a *bodhisattva*. Whatever other elements there are in such a person's mind, they have this ardent wish to live in a certain way and so help others as much as they possibly can.

In the Tibetan Tradition, a verse for taking refuge and generating the highest motivation, bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment, is recited before many of their diverse practices:

I take refuge, until I attain enlightenment,
in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Supreme Assembly
By the merit I have accumulated by practicing Generosity and other Virtues,
may I attain Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings.

Here, the phrase, Generosity and other Virtues, refers to what are called the Six Perfections. These are the path of the Bodhisattva, as described in Tradition. They are Generosity, Ethics, Patience, Effort, Meditation, and Wisdom.

Resolve

I have heard that the Dalai Lama, when asked what is the quickest way to enlightenment, was moved to tears by the question. He answered, with characteristic humility, that he had been practicing most of his life, and had only been able to make a little progress on the spiritual path. Then he said that we shouldn't think even in terms of lifetimes, but that instead we should think in terms of aeons. This is the kind of resolve that we need.

In the following passage, from the film ‘Compassion and Wisdom: A Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life’, writer and director James Zito beautifully and succinctly expresses the Traditional background and the aim of the Bodhisattva:

‘The Buddha taught that the enlightenment and spiritual liberation he achieved were by no means unique to him. Rather they are potentially available to every living being. The *Bodhisattva* is a follower of the Buddha, who in deep sympathy and compassion for the suffering of the world, vows to do the utmost to help all living beings reach their highest potential. The Bodhisattva works tirelessly to release beings from their temporal sufferings into the timeless peace and fulfillment of Buddhist enlightenment.

‘According to Buddhism, the state of enlightenment is the full expression of the innate potential for compassion and wisdom, which lies more or less dormant within every being. This innate potential is known as the Buddha Nature, and it is the Vow of the Bodhisattva to help each and every being bring their inherent Buddha Nature to its full awakening as the state of enlightenment.’

The Bodhisattva vow has as its goal for beings, freedom from suffering, and not just the result of suffering, but its causes as well; and the happiness of all, and not just in a temporary way, but lasting happiness. This all comes from the mind. A Buddhist, therefore, is dedicated to finding freedom himself or herself, and sharing that with all others. When it comes to passing along teachings, our own realization is the vital factor in any communication.

All Buddhist traditions express the utmost need for wisdom. In the Way of the Bodhisattva, such understanding is viewed in relation to the needs of all. In fact, we can say that the Mahayana has as its starting point the inseparability of love and wisdom.

Arya Nagarjuna taught that:

If the rest of humanity and I wish to attain unsurpassed awakening
 {so needed for all of our sake}
 the basis for this is bodhicitta, as stable as the King of Mountains:
 Compassion, which touches everything, and pristine wisdom,
 which does not rely on duality.

Ultimate Nature, Relative Practice

The nature of mind, our ultimate nature, is described as originally pure, vast, and perfect, naturally awake, and ungraspable. It is beyond concepts, and non-dual; lacking nothing, it is complete in all qualities. In the relative, only apparently dualistic practices that we do, however, the path is described as expressions of compassion: generosity, prayer, patience, forgiveness, the cultivation of peace, and so on. These are all expressions of love.

The Seventh Dalai Lama wrote:

The expanded mind which thinks
only of that which benefits others
is a tree of endless fruit;
one touch of its divine sap
quenches even the word ‘suffering’

Everyone who has experienced a mother’s or a grandmother’s love knows how true it can be: being touched by a compassionate person when we are suffering can instantly reduce, or even totally remove our pain. From a loving person, this profound true nature comes forward effortlessly, and heals.

All beings want happiness, but as long as we do not know the causes of happiness, instead, we blindly create the causes of suffering. In response to this, what is called the Bodhisattva Vow is the dedication that we have in us to helping others, by realizing our own true nature as fully as possible, and drawing from this ocean of light. This sense of dedication to others can be there with or without words, or it can be taken formally and re-affirmed. It is the commitment of our whole life energy to helping others as much as we can, and in as many ways as we can, to alleviate their suffering and to support their health and happiness. This Vow is the vibrant central principle of the Mahayana Path.

Yes, but how much can one person really do for another?

It has been asked many times – how much can one person do for another? What is this about someone vowing to do something so significant for another, such as ‘carrying a person to the other shore’, and freeing them from suffering? While it is true that ultimately every person has to understand the causes of health and happiness for himself or herself, there is so much that can be

done for another. I only have to think of what others have given me for this thought to become real to me.

We all need support and encouragement; freedom from fear and hunger; we all need to have medicine available, and enough warm clothes. Most of all, we need respect, love and clear teachings, in the form of good human examples, and in some language we can relate to. These are very great things, and the Bodhisattva vow is the intention to give all these things, all needful things, to all beings, our family.

Here is one traditional verse from the Indian Saint, Shantideva, that expresses the compassionate motivation at the heart of the Bodhisattva vow:

As long as diseases afflict living beings,
May I be the doctor, the medicine,
and also the nurse who restores them to health

May I fall as rain to increase
the harvests that feed living beings
and in times of dire famine,
may I myself be food and drink

In one sense, to say that vow is the flower of our self knowledge is to say that vow shows how deep a persons' knowledge is. If there is no deep knowledge, then there is no deep vow either. The vow of a Bodhisattva though, is based on something broad and deep. It is based on universal love and compassion, and insight into our real nature. It is possible to feel that, not only do we and our family and friends want and deserve happiness and freedom from suffering, but everyone, really wants these things. In that we are equal.

When we aim to benefit even one other person, something in us wakes up. When we extend that and aim to feed, comfort and care for our group, family and friends, then that much more in us wakes up. And when we extend that even further, it's possible to awaken the sense of something universal in ourself, working for the good of all.

Sometimes we are able to glimpse this universal nature, and then again we are taken up with the particulars of our life, but the shining basis, which is our compassionate nature, remains the same. There is always something universal,

beyond any one form or action or life span, that supports and sustains us, and is the source of all our vows. Perhaps this is why Lama Yeshe said that when we have bodhi-citta, the thought to benefit all others in the best possible ways, we take on a more universal character.

‘When you have this kind of motivation,’ Lama Lodro says, ‘it makes whatever practice you do very powerful.’ We are saying very clearly and strongly with our life and practice, ‘May all beings be free of suffering!’ ‘May all beings be happy!’

How to increase compassion

All contemplation has one thing in common, as shown by its etymology, and that is that we are giving time and attention to a particular subject. Usually the feeling of compassion is associated with a sense of sadness, heaviness or sorrow, and that kind of feeling can’t be sustained for long. There are associations of suffering, and the feeling perhaps that looking at these things too long will actually weaken us. This is because we don’t know how to go about thinking about suffering. It’s important that we go about this in the right way if we want workable results.

When we are able to successfully contemplate a subject like suffering, and increase our compassion, it is because we do it slowly, and carefully. To do it well, we should reflect and then stop and refresh ourselves and assimilate what we’ve been thinking about. Then the effect is strengthening. Our determination to help only increases; our clarity and sense of priorities is made sharper; and our delight in doing something useful also increases.

In actual practice

Forming the idea of a dedication before practice, setting one’s motivation is like saying, ‘I will cultivate this crop for this purpose, for this person or these people’. Then we cultivate – plant the seed, let the sun shine, water, pull the weeds, and finally, harvest. Then, in our thoughts, when we dedicate at the end of a practice, again we are saying, ‘This belongs to this person, or these people’. ‘May it accomplish this benefit’.

Now, I know this can’t be proven to you unless you are a person with some amount of extra sensory perception, but I do believe that, when we have a clear idea of communicating some benefit, that positive energy is transmitted instantly. This is

the basis for the concept of absent healing. Most of us live ordinary lives, I know, but I thought I should at least mention it. It really does feel this way sometimes, and it changes the way I think of the practice itself.

When we have others in mind, a universal aim, even eventually, as a long term goal, then we don't feel like the harvest of benefit is ours alone. We also gain, naturally, but it feels like the result is bigger, much bigger than just our own gain. We can live in a state of big generosity. Then, when we actually do meet the person or people we have been practicing for, it's easy, natural, to 'give over', or extend to them what we have produced, whatever peace or clarity, or light, health or strength. We share these things in whatever way they can receive them. We can feel, 'Here, this belongs to you...' aah...

Now, about this 'all beings' business...

As soon as we try to practice like this, it's immediately clear that some people or situations are easier to practice for, and some more difficult, or impossible for now. We should take special note of who we have a problem with, and make special efforts to dedicate our practice to them until we wear away that resistance.

Gradually, in every Buddhist approach to developing the good heart we all have, the aim is to become more and more inclusive, and completely impartial in our kindness and compassion.

I think of teachers and sages who seem to have accomplished this impartiality of love. It looks like they treat everyone they meet with the same kindness and compassion. This is a high and wonderful aim, more than worth whatever effort we make in that direction. It's the basis for great things.

Dharma centers' red flashing lights and whooping si-reens

If we go to a center where they chant, 'saving all beings', but the people there won't give you the time of day, or even look you in the eye, you should know something is seriously wrong. The people there, and especially the teachers, have completely missed the point. A practice center should be a place of mutual support. Warm and alive, it should be a place where people can feel safe, and where inner disciplines can flourish.

Speaking realistically for a change

The Bodhisattva vow is something we will naturally need to bring to mind again and again. At times, almost all of us will only be able to focus on our own struggle. Sometimes this is only right and appropriate, but as long as we live in a world with others, this intention, to help others as much as we can, is a most useful one to have. It connects us to others, or re-connects us to others, and it is the most fulfilling way to live. We may be able to actualize only a small part of that aim, but the motivation itself is something noble, generative, healing, strengthening, illuminating and enlivening.

We never give up

One Tibetan Lama here in San Francisco, Lama Lodro described the depth of dedication of the Bodhisattva, saying:

‘A Bodhisattva would go to be born one million times in hell to help one sentient being. One million times he would go, and not complain- he would enjoy that, actually. Beings need help, and he enjoys helping. That’s the Bodhisattva motivation.’

Another verse by Shantideva says:

For as long as space endures,
and for as long as living beings remain,
until then may I too abide
to dispel the misery of the world

All my lives

I know that many Westerners, like myself, don’t see past and future lives – literally being born back then, in that place, and in the future in some other place. What then to do with the idea of past and future when it comes to vow? For me, it continues to be helpful to think beyond this one life span – however we conceive of ourselves. This works well in terms of the Bodhisattva vow. We can aim to dedicate ourselves to things that we feel can help now, and will be helpful in the long term.

Here is an analogy: If we see that there is a river close to where some houses are, and that each year the river comes a little closer, it would be right to solve the problem now, while we can. If we don't, then it may not be this generation, but eventually the houses of our children or our children's children could be washed away. This kind of thinking ahead puts our own lives in a far truer context than we usually think in. More meaning is evident in our own lives now, also, when we think this way, the present is viewed in relation to the next generations.

Good seeds

We can also think of our lives as a chance to plant good seeds. Of course a tree takes years or decades to grow and become shelter, and bear fruit, but the work of planting and nourishing has great worth. If we think of the wonderful things we have inherited from past generations, teachings, art, institutions, we can feel gratitude, and this can also help us to live in a way that is dedicated to those we share this life with, and to future generations. May they have great trees and clean water, and everything they need for happy lives!

Thinking far ahead also makes the problems of this one life easier. We are related to the past and future generations, and we all have our part to do. Our part is not the work of the past – they had their own work; and our part is not the task of the next generation – they will have their own work. We've inherited riches, but also a world of suffering, greed and confusion, so doing our part is a very great thing – really, it is the most important thing individually for any of us.

What's in a name?

When we have insight into conditions, and knowledge of what will bring resolution to problems, then, whatever our place in the world, we can be doing the most needed kind of work. We can be fulfilling what is here being called 'the Bodhisattva vow'. Of course, this goes beyond any one name or Tradition. Whatever group we belong to, when we know something of our human capacities for freedom, health and clarity, and when we know the extent of confusion and unnecessary suffering, then quite naturally we will find ways to work effectively.

We may work with a group, or alone. It may be with a few close friends, or in association with Traditions and lineages that hold the same vows. However it works out, knowing our potential, and how much need there still is- these two make up our response to the world. The response to life of a person awake to this much is the Bodhisattva vow, whatever name we give it. It is the vow to serve.

Here is joy, strength, freedom, fire to warm, wind, earth, and delicious water too; food, music, gifts to give, and peace.

When it comes to birth, death and rebirth, they say an ordinary person is controlled by karma, habit energy, and delusion, whereas a person who is awake and free of these is controlled by compassion. He or she has no choice but to work for others.

Bodhicitta, the thought to benefit, equalizes the eight worldly dharmas

There is nothing more practical than working in our daily life with our emotions, and our mind. Whether we want to meet them or not, our responses to life are always there, and they can be changed in a positive direction. Having a strong clear intention in our life meets these factors head on. They say that the energy of the Bodhisattva vow ‘equalizes’, or levels flat, and frees us from the eight worldly dharmas. These are the four pairs that people spend so much time and energy chasing or avoiding: material gain and loss, physical pleasure and pain, praise and criticism, and good reputation or bad reputation, or recognition.

What this means is that, when the factor of living our lives to benefit all others as much as we can is strong in us, then we don’t get caught by these things. They don’t limit us or obstruct us or disturb our mind in any way. Even just having this aim with our life, there are already real freedoms that come with it.

This is the only thing that tips the balance

In the 8th century, Shantideva wrote:

Just as a flash of lightning on a dark, cloudy night
for an instant brightly illuminates all,
likewise in this world, through the might of Buddha,
a wholesome thought rarely and briefly appears.

Hence virtue is perpetually feeble,
and the great strength of evil is extremely intense.
Except for a Fully Awakening Mind
(the dedication to help all others)
by what other virtue will it be overcome?

and

This intention to benefit all beings,
which does not arise in others even for their own sake,
is an extraordinary jewel of the mind,
and its birth, an unprecedented wonder...

To which I say, all these centuries later, a hearty ‘a-men brother!’

In these verses, the ‘Fully Awakening Mind’ is the thought of universal benefit.

When I think of loneliness, death, suffering, and all that is unpredictable and tragic in this world; the inevitable separation from friends and loved ones, the cruelty and madness, all the absurdity and waste – all of it – this one factor is the only thing I can think of that makes life livable.

This one great vow reveals the capacity we have to help each other. It reminds me that there have been in the past, and that there are now, people who are working to help others, and aiming to do so, and that we can also take up this aim and this work. That, for me, is the glory of being alive. Now and forever, we can actually do something of real value with our lives.

This intention makes it possible to live with an awareness of all the amazing good and all the terrible things, and to live with resolve, commitment and joy. This is the only thing, really, that gives me the courage to face whatever life may bring. If trembling fear is the feeling of not being capable, then right here is where resourcefulness, and therefore blazing true confidence, and solidity is found. This one aim, this one intention, tips the balance, in favor of life.

Skillful Means

Once we arrive at the Great Way – the Mahayana , with its strong central motivation to serve all beings, and to liberate all living beings, we will utilize every resource, we will do anything to communicate the Dharma, take any form to meet people's needs, to benefit them, to speak in a way they can understand, and lead them step by step to freedom.

Because of the great sufferings and needs that are here, we *must* search until we find the methods that work for us, and that are effective in helping others. A diversity of forms in Buddhism arose out of this motivation to benefit self and others. What is referred to as creative ‘Skillful Means’ develops out of compassionate need, and it is the overriding reason for not to be attached to any

one way of doing things, or saying things. As long as we keep to essential principles of wisdom and compassion, then it is Buddhist Dharma. Skillful means, or Upaya, are just what is necessary to help and to reach people.

The Sakya Trinzin, in ‘Mo – The Tibetan Divination System’ says the following:

“In Buddhism, especially in the Mahayana Tradition, it has been taught that the highest good is to benefit other living beings... Numerous scriptures tell us that a bodhisattva should not hesitate to use any method that would bring relative and ultimate happiness to others. The bodhisattva has been enjoined to assist others by giving them spiritual teachings, material objects such as medicine and food, fearlessness, loving kindness and advice on how to deal with the travails of worldly existence.”

There is a figure in Mahayana Buddhism (The Chinese Mahayana, and the Tibetan Tradition) called Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, who is sometimes shown with one thousand arms reaching out to help people. Of course 'a thousand' means 'limitless' in Eastern Traditions. Sometimes 'myriad' and sometimes 'Ten-thousand' are used - all these terms have the same meaning.

In the more visible hands in the iconography one can see various implements, a vase, a rosary, The Wheel of Teaching the Dharma, and so on. The meaning is that Avalokiteshvara, which is our own compassionate nature, has the ability to take infinite forms to benefit others.

Here are a few of my favorite quotes from Lama Yeshe, on the motivation to benefit all, the enlightened attitude of a bodhisattva, called bodhicitta:

‘Bodhicitta is not partial. Wherever you go with bodhicitta if you meet people, rich people or poor people, black or white, you are comfortable and you can communicate.’

‘Bodhicitta is the intoxicant that numbs us to pain and fills us with bliss.’

‘Bodhicitta is the cloud that carries the rain of positive energy to nourish growing things.’

‘We need the pure innermost thought of bodhicitta; wherever we go that will take care of us.’

{think of the Great Aim: bodhicitta is the aim to become a Buddha, in order to bring the greatest benefit to all sentient beings}

Vow

From this point forward,
I dedicate myself to removing the suffering of all living beings,
and to bringing them happiness

I dedicate myself fully to their healing and awakening;
to their all having comfort,
strength of body, mind, and spirit,
most excellent nourishment, health, longevity
every level of protection,
shelter, food, clothing, medicine, education,
joy and wisdom

In order to accomplish the needs of living beings
in the most effective way,
I will develop my wisdom and compassion
just as my teachers have done
I aim to become free of all faults, and complete in all qualities
and, day by day, hour by hour
always offer as much help as I can

In this way, I will make a gift of my life
In this way, my own life will be fulfilled

I dedicate myself fully, leaving nothing out,
to the complete healing, fulfillment and enlightenment
of all living beings

No matter how long it takes
no matter how difficult it may be
no matter what it costs

With all my heart and with all my strength,
I vow to always serve all living beings
in every way that is necessary for them
and in every way that will bring each and every one of them
true and lasting health and happiness

The Bodhisattva Thought Training Teachings

{From a letter to a friend, and included in ‘A few thoughts on lay practice – just the gold’}

And now, a few thoughts on Buddhism...

I realize I haven’t said much so far that was specific to Buddhism, so maybe I can say something along those lines now. It’s not that non-Buddhists wouldn’t gain some benefit from what follows, in fact I’m sure they would, but it makes sense to me that the most will be gained by followers of Buddhism in general, and those who follow and aspire to the Mahayana ideals in particular, and I’ll try to say why this is so. You’ll have to tell me if this makes sense to you, but, from my side, I’ll do my best.

I mentioned bodhicitta, ‘the mind of enlightenment’ in the last section, as the mind of freedom, happiness, and Great Love. A person who has this great heart/mind is called a Bodhisattva – one who lives to serve others with wisdom and compassion. This leads to the Thought Training teachings, that come from dedicated teachers in the past. They are ways to develop in everyday life.

If what are expressed in Mahayana Buddhism as the inclusive, Universal ideals of the Bodhisattva, and the Bodhisattva Vow are well understood, then the door opens up to using the Bodhisattva Thought Training Teachings’. They all work.

For Buddhists, then, it should be said, the ideal is different in some ways from what the average person on the street would think of as ‘a developed person’, or a good person. A Bodhisattva is something more than that.

For one, from his first talk, the Buddha spoke of the possibility of freedom from the suffering that comes from delusion, from not understanding ourselves or each other. As Buddhists, we all hold this ideal, of a liberated person, as something we can each achieve. It’s what we aim for in our life and practice, as well as the basis for helping others.

In addition, can we aspire to all the qualities that we see most clearly in our teachers, of kindness, insight and strength that come from their realization of the path.

Look at all the Tibetan Buddhist thankas, and statues – artistic representations of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, as well as photographs of monks and nuns, and our teachers. Search your recollection of the teachings you’ve studied, and think of the teachers you have met and received teachings from. Think of what they offer, and embody: These are all qualities we can develop – the stable peace, dignity, wisdom, strength, gentleness, joy and love.

Even if we just hold this aim – to go in this direction of developing our Wisdom and Compassion and ability, just as our teachers have done, so we can help others as much as possible, it is a very great thing, the guiding principle in our lives, however far we get with it.

What’s called The Bodhisattva Vow is traditionally described as the vow to become a Buddha in order to benefit all sentient beings. To me, this can sometimes seem abstract, and such a far goal as to feel - not so helpful. Add to it that we, as ordinary beings, may not have much of an idea of what a fully enlightened Buddha is, and it can all kind of wash out into some vague, high minded idea. But it needn’t be this way.

It’s true that vows shouldn’t come easily, but after much reflection, what we *can* actually connect with ourselves are those qualities of wisdom and compassion we see and remember, and intuit, in the Buddha, in our teachers, and in ourselves in our best moments.

We recognize the need for such wisdom and compassion and health in the world, and in the lives of those we love, and so this is what we vow to develop as much as we can. We vow to just go in this direction as much as we can, and in that way we make a gift of our life.

Thinking that way makes more sense to me. It is approachable. That, to me is bodhicitta, the thought of enlightenment. That, to me, is the Bodhisattva Vow. Others may disagree with me if they like, that’s alright – I’m just saying what works for me, to think this way.

I sometimes wonder what a person would think of the thought training teachings, if they *hadn’t* taken up the Bodhisattva vow. If someone was living a totally self centered life, they would probably wouldn’t make much sense. In fact, they’d probably seem crazy! But when living our lives to benefit others makes the most sense to us, then these ideas, called Thought Training, are a real treasure.

These practices helped me so much while I was in the City. Together with Thich Nhat Hanh's eminently sane teachings on taking care of ourselves wisely, they can make living with others in a city really fruitful. It can be our bodhisattva training ground.

The most famous thought training texts, and the ones most often commented on by teachers, are The Eight Verses on Training the Mind, The Seven Point Mind Training Teaching, and one called Transforming Suffering and Happiness into the Path.

If you are interested in this subject, Lama Zopa has a couple of books that I know of on thought training – Transforming Problems into Happiness, and The Door to Satisfaction; and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's Enlightened Courage and The Great Path of Awakening, by Jamgon Kongtrul, are commentaries on the Seven Point Mind Training. There are others, but these are a good place to start.

Here is my own working version of the Eight Verses:

Eight Verses On Training The Mind

1. May I always cherish all living beings
with the determination to accomplish for them the highest good, that is more
precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel

2. When among others,
I will think of myself as lowest among all,
and will hold others to be supreme,
from the very depths of my heart

3. I will learn to search into my mind,
and as soon as an afflictive emotion arises,
endangering both self and others,
I will firmly face and avert it.

4. When meeting with those who have especially strong sins and suffering,
I will learn to cherish them as if I had found a precious treasure, very difficult to find

5. When others treat me badly,
with slander, abuse, and so on,
I will accept all loss
and offer the victory to them

6. When one I have benefited hurts me,
I will learn to view that one as my own Supreme Guru

7. In short, I will learn to offer all help and happiness
to all beings,
both directly and indirectly,
and I will remove as much suffering
as these beings may have

8. I will keep these practices undiminished
by the usual worldly preoccupations,
and by knowing appearances to be
like illusions,
I will be without the limitations
that accompany ego-grasping

As you can see, this is a very complete teaching.

One verse from A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life that I've been thinking of goes as follows: 'Unlike myself, these beings are not capable, therefore, I shall do it for them'

Relating this to practice, and to our whole lives, we can get strength, courage, determination, and clear sightedness from seeing the needs that exist. When I think of what I saw over the years around where I worked, at 16th St. in the Mission in San Francisco – the struggle and addiction, the violence, the hard-heartedness of people (among other things that were great and uplifting too) then, how could it be any other way?

Of course, there's a limit to how much we can be around, which I can personally attest to. At some point we want and need to step back from all that, for the sake of balance. This dynamic, more than anything else, points up to me the difference between what they call Aspirational and Engaging Bodhicitta.

Bodhicitta is this intention to develop ourselves, our wisdom, compassion and ability in order to benefit others. This kind of- motivation leading to action- was what was demonstrated by you, when you took up the study and practice of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

In Buddhism, at some point, the motivation tips over into action, which, as they've said it in the Mahayana, translates into the Six Perfections – Generosity, Ethics, Patience, Joyful Effort, Meditation, and Wisdom.

The good hearted motivations we make, based on what we see in the world, are so important. They are the power behind any practice we do, to get free ourselves, and giving to all others we love! But aspiration alone doesn't 'cook the rice', if you know what I mean. At some point, naturally, we need to practice in such a way that we improve along the lines we intend. We will need to find and develop what works for us to accomplish our ends.

We can't force it, nor should we. When the time is right, the whole arc of study and practice is like water flowing down a mountain. When our motivation is strong enough, without a doubt, we'll find a way.

I recently mentioned to my sister that what's great about the thought training teachings is that they take the very things we usually try to avoid – unpleasant situations, our own limitations, fears, and so on, and *uses* them to progress on the path.

I remember thinking, when I first came across these teachings, that the only thing 'wrong' with them is that they are not better known, and made use of.

I think that this especially true about one part of the Seven Point Mind Training teaching. Everything else I felt I'd heard before, but when I came to the part called 'transforming adverse circumstances into the path', I knew I had found something special. This is the heart of the Thought Training Teachings, I think.

I was intrigued, relieved, and excited all at once! Relieved, and glad, that such a teaching actually exists, and naturally the door opened. I could see the point – once we have a determination to use our life to help others, and if we're Buddhist, and have had at least some glimpse of the possibility of the end of confusion and suffering, as proposed from the outset by the Buddha in the Third Noble Truth, then it's natural that seeing suffering and the great needs that exist will make us only more determined to practice, and to share the result of that with others.

Towards the end of The Great Path of Awakening, there are some additional verses I remember that compare knowing suffering in ourselves and in the world to being like the wind blowing when there's a fire – it just makes that fire greatly spread and increase. So it is with Thought Training. When we become aware of some need, instead of being overwhelmed or depressed by that, it can really empower us to work, diligently, and for however long it takes, no matter what it costs, to solve the problem. What can I say? Such is love... Such is knowing our deep nature in response to the needs of the world...

A few years after first encountering the Thought Training teachings, I read with some surprise a text called 'Transforming Happiness and Suffering into the Path', by the Third Dordrupchen, Tenpe Nyima (there's an online version now, on the website called Lotsawa House).

I was surprised because, well, we all know that suffering needs transformation, but happiness too? We usually never think of this as something that needs to be brought onto the path, but, for the sake of opposing laziness, and so we don't get distracted by whatever good circumstances we are currently enjoying, such as health, friends, good weather, wealth, or learning, we do need this kind of teaching. Here is a quote from the text I mentioned:

"Whatever happiness and the various things that cause happiness appear, if we slip under their power, then we will grow increasingly conceited, smug and lazy, which will block our spiritual path and progress."

Now, here is a view on practice that is comprehensive, and one that can keep us on an even keel. It says: whatever our circumstances, this is the best time to practice.

Especially regarding our own happiness, we should recognize our great good fortune compared to so many others in this world of ours, and use it to practice Dharma for the benefit of both ourselves and others.

This term – ‘transforming happiness’ – reminds me of the story of the farmer with a hole in the roof of his house. When it was sunny he thought, ‘There’s no need to fix the roof today – it’s sunny!’, and when it was raining he thought, ‘I can’t fix the roof – it’s raining!’, and so it never got done. This idea, of using whatever circumstances we’re in to practice, helps to make the most of wherever we are now.

The signs of successful practice is that we will have more peace, joy, patience, kindness towards ourselves and others, and glimpses of the ultimate nature of the mind. It’s said that we can also learn to feel spontaneously happy when some difficult situation appears in our life, because of the opportunity it gives us to practice.

Of course, if these methods don’t work, what can I say, try something else. Really. If you’re not satisfied, try something else...

There is a branch from the Eastern and South Eastern Buddhist Schools, that although it wasn’t presented in this form in the Thought Training teachings, still fits into that category, as encouragement and inspiration to practice. This is what is called ‘The Five Recollections’. They are, of aging, sickness, death, separation from loved ones, and karma. The phrasing of them begins, ‘I am of the nature to age, I cannot escape aging...’ and then goes on from there, through the five.

Recollecting impermanence especially is a spur to remove laziness and procrastination, a lack of focus and low energy. We never think, when things are going well, of morality. Why spoil the party, right? But in this way we are setting ourselves up, and we don’t really live fully awake to that aspect of our life while we are here together on earth, and the preciousness of each day we have with those we love. I’ve taken to calling, for my own purpose, the reflections on impermanence, ‘a midwife for love’, because they help for *all* of our love to be born fully into this world.

This is one part of the Teachings of Don Juan, those writings by Carlos Castaneda, that I have remembered and made good use of over the years. He called it, ‘Having death as an advisor’. I use it like this: if I’m ever in doubt about whether I should do something or not do it, I look at it in light of the fact of my impermanence here, in this body, and the uncertainty of the time of my death.

We only get one go round, here, like this. If I can touch that truth, it usually straightens me out right away. Whether it’s ‘should I get this book’, or write this, or,

‘should I give this away’, or hold onto, or let go of these thoughts, the effect is almost always immediate. This cuts all doubts... Now, I may not know much, but I can plainly tell what I would rather have done, or tried to do than have left undone. To me, in the end, loving fully is the only thing that makes it all alright, actually, whatever this life brings. If I can love fully, in fact, there is no place I’d rather be.

I wrote a poem a while back on this subject that you might like. Here it is with a short note introducing it. I usually don’t try to explain a poem, but in this case a few words of how it came to be might add something to it.

{ I went on a short retreat a couple of months ago (in 2011), and when I came back here to San Francisco, on the first night back I had this dream, of a teenaged girl who went to join her parents in a concentration camp. Her father said to her, 'Why are you here? You could have escaped and saved yourself!' and the girl said, No! If I am here I can offer you some joy, for as long as we are together. I can make the suffering less! There is no place I would rather be...'

I tried to catch what was said and put it in a poem, but I don't know how successful I was... in any case, I had to try... you know the feeling...}

No place I’d rather be

In good times,
hard times,
and the worst of times,
there is no place I’d rather be
than *right there*

If you ask me why,
it is because,
by the power of love,
I can share the joy with you, and make it more
I can help to make the pain less,
and I can offer happiness

That is why,
through it all,
and when things get tough,
and even,

or *especially* in the worst of times
in the worst of worlds,
there is no place that I would rather be

If this were the only world
where there is both happiness and suffering,
still, I would choose just this one
to be with you

By being here together,
we can make the way better for one another
Don't you see?
That means more than anything else to me

For this very reason,
it's worth every effort

whatever we need to go through,
it is, all of it, then,
completely worthwhile

Giving of ourselves,
Measured next to this world's
pleasures –
there is no comparison, really

People don't know of this, or else they don't feel capable,
and so they hide

or run to small pleasures
that disappear even in the moment and are gone

But because we can be light for one another,
make each other's trials that much less,
and offer food, and shelter
even for future times,
through love,
there is no place that I would rather be
than right here

This thought
strengthens me in hundreds of ways

If we only get one song,
and that song is our life,
then let this be my song

Let everything else be done, or left undone,
no matter –

but just this, to aim to care for you
in the best of ways -
this brings life,
freshness that does not fade

Every other gain and loss,
no matter -
but just this
of all worlds, of all paths,
to be with you,
and to offer you my hand,
for your whole life
oh, the joy of this!

Tonglen – A quintessential symbol

To sum up this precious Bodhisattva Thought Training of ours, that is a response to this world we live in, to our own limitations and difficulties, and to those of others, and the way to fulfillment in the midst of it all, here are a few words on Tonglen, as a quintessential symbol (for more on this subject, see the essay called ‘Regarding Tonglen, in Part Two of A few thoughts on lay practice, or online, as before).

The Bodhisattva practice of what’s called tonglen is traditionally set out in a sequence of images, but, just as a story unfolding can carry one message, just so, with this practice. It is a symbol of the great dedicated heart that people know everywhere. This, most simply, represents the essential enlightened activity of removing suffering and giving happiness.

In the traditional sequence of images, we imagine that we breathe in the suffering of ourself or others, and dissolve it completely into our heart, so that nothing of it remains whatsoever, and then we breathe out, from our heart sending happiness, and absolutely whatever is needed.

We can imagine that there is a brilliant jewel at our heart, sending out light like this. We all have this nature in us that is always bright and shining, without ego, and always loving. This is called Ultimate Bodhicitta.

We can speak of these things sequentially, but when one arrives, the other departs, like light dispelling shadow, health displacing discomfort, and wisdom dawning in the mind removing confusion.

It's like the appearance of a friend in times of need, that immediately removes loneliness and brings joy. The very presence of our love and compassion can do the same.

With this in mind, here are a few examples of how tonglen can be practiced: (Again I notice how that characteristic of all thought training practice is there – of not moving away from limitation or difficulty, but *of using it to progress...*)

If I'm feeling restless, I can imagine that I'm taking in all restlessness, of myself and others, developing compassion, and I send out peace. This is love. The same with sleepiness or dullness or discomfort or pain in meditation or in life. Instead of just lamenting my own inability, of being stuck in a rut or an unproductive state, I can choose to breathe in and out, contemplating how it is this way for *so many* people, and how it holds us *all* back.

This way I can generate a greater resolve than if I felt like I was just practicing for myself alone, or just for this one moment's peace and clarity and well being. I can bring to mind light, and fill myself with it, and then send this out to others on the out breath. There are as many applications of love and compassion as there are needs in our lives, the lives of others, and in this world.

So often when we feel separate, or limited, a practice like this can help us to reconnect with others, and to tap into the resources of our deeper nature. One way or another, however we approach it, this is what we all need to do.

Amen.

A summary of the Stages of the Path Teachings, with notes

Introduction

I originally set out to write down just a few thoughts on the Tradition of the Lam Rim, or Stages of the Path teachings from Tibetan Buddhism, as I now understand them. My intention was to have just a page or two to refer to as a glance meditation, that touched briefly on the main points. It seems I had a bit more I wanted to say, and so, after a day or two of writing, I had, instead, a longer essay.

Still wanting to have a brief summary of these precious teachings, I went through the longer article, and selected a few passages to set on a page separately. These turned out to be, essentially, what I had sketched in the first place on a piece of paper.

The idea of pairing notes, and a more extensive explanation, such as is found in an entire book, is that these two forms of the same teachings can potentially complement, and reinforce each other. After reading a longer commentary, when a person then looks at a verse summary, he or she can have a better idea of what's being referred to. Both can then be helpful in reflecting and meditating on these themes.

For this reason, I would like to offer both of these writings in the pages that follow. The concise form, called 'A Summary of the Stages of the Path Teachings', is presented here as Part I, and the essay, called 'An Overview of the Stages of the Path', as Part II.

May it be beneficial.

Part I

A summary of the Stages of the Path Teachings

‘Three sets of causes, with three results’

*Taking Refuge, becoming liberated,
and enlightened, all arise due to causes,
and we should know what these are.*

I. Entering the Buddhist Path

We all have Buddha Nature, which is the potential to have happiness, to become liberated, and enlightened. Our spiritual teachers help us to know this, our true nature. Remembering their wisdom and their great kindness naturally awakens deep respect, gratitude, faith, and devotion.

Following their guidance, we then reflect on the subjects of:

the preciousness of this human life we have now;

the reality of death and rebirth;

both the evident and the hidden sufferings of samsara, or unenlightened existence,

cause and effect, including teachings on ethics as a way to bring greater peace,

and,

the qualities of the Three Jewels.

Thinking about these, and wanting to be safe, and as happy as possible, now and in the future, both for our own sake, and for the sake of others, and having faith, *these are the causes, and the result is taking refuge*, with all the subsequent benefits that follow: safety, happiness, and well being that lead onward to greater fulfillment.

II. Entering the Path to Complete Freedom from Suffering

We can then add to the factors covered so far the teachings that point out that all of samsara, or ego-centered, unenlightened existence is only suffering, and the way that liberation is possible.

Understanding these on an intellectual level, believing in the possibility of liberation, and not wanting to suffer any more, *these are the causes* for the motivation to be completely and permanently free of samsara to arise naturally in the mind, and the practice of the Three Higher Trainings, of Ethics, Meditation and Wisdom, *and the result, which is liberation.*

III. Entering the Mahayana directly– the Path of Universal Benefit

In addition to the above realizations, when one adds great love and compassion for all that lives, together with the thought that enlightenment is both possible, and is the highest good for all, so greatly needed in these times, *these are the causes* for the bodhisattva motivation, which is the aim to become a Buddha in order to bring the greatest benefit to all sentient beings, and the practice of the Six Perfections, *and the result, which is enlightenment.*

Part II

An Overview of the Stages of the Path Teachings - Notes on ‘Three sets of causes, with three results’

‘Let’s shift now to the spiritual domain, where the aim is to increase an experiential awareness of different virtuous minds, by repeatedly contemplating the various reasons that will elicit them... What you must do here is contemplate over and over again the most penetrating of scriptural citations and arguments, and in particular those arguments that are the most effective for eliciting a spiritual transformation within your mind.’

- from How to Meditate on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment, by Pabongkha Dechen Nyinpo

A summary of the Stages of the Path Teachings

‘Three sets of causes, with three results’

**Taking Refuge, becoming liberated,
and enlightened, all arise due to causes, and we should know what these are.**

I.

Entering the Buddhist Path

Since here are a number of different presentations of the Stages of the Path Teachings, particularly in the order of the introductory elements, I thought it would be useful for my mind to be as clear as I can about this most important subject, and to write out the way of thinking about it that makes the most practical sense to me.

I have called the following outline ‘three sets of causes, with three results’.

The different arrangements of the Lam Rim, or Stages of the Path all have the same themes for meditation, with only a change in emphasis, or of sequence setting them apart from each other.

All refer, in one way or another, to what is sometimes called ‘*the working basis*’—and these I identify as follows:

We all have Buddha Nature, which is the potential to have happiness, to become liberated, and enlightened.

and

Our spiritual teachers help us to know this, our true nature. Remembering their wisdom and their great kindness naturally awakens deep respect, gratitude, faith, and devotion.

These are ever-present factors throughout the teachings, and they exist and appear throughout the various trainings again and again, sometimes more implicit, and sometimes more vividly, tangibly manifest, and cherished.

I compare the working basis to having good earth. I imagine that a mature farmer, seeing fine earth, in a good climate, would feel real joy, knowing that anything could be planted there, and yield a rich harvest.

In the same way, we have this ground, with the potential for genuine, stable happiness, health and peace. We live in a world at a time when wise and compassionate teachers have lived and taught, and their teachings are available. This is like having good earth, and good seeds.

Books and talks are available, and the living examples of wholeness, balance, serenity and joy of our teachers is evident.

{See: Lama Yeshe, Thich Nhat Hanh, Bokar Rinpoche, the Karmapa, Tsultrik Rinpoche, Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche, Lama Zopa, Matthieu Ricard, Ani Tenzin Palmo, Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro, Tulku Urgyen, The Dali Lama, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, Lama Lodro Rinpoche, and others...}

But many people do not know what we have by nature, and by virtue of living in these times. On our part, we have to see what we have, so we can begin to recognize the work-ability of our situation here, have enthusiasm for practice, and confidence that good can come from it.

I imagine a sign outside a storefront where someone is giving a talk – the sign says, ‘this way to happiness’. Many people would walk by, and some others would maybe just poke their head in for a minute or two, with only mild curiosity.

Others may stay a while and listen to what is being said, with more or less interest. For those who are interested, there are different kinds of motivation for listening to teachings on how to find happiness in this life.

After touching on the working basis that we each share, all that follows now in the Stages of the Path teachings can be heard by listeners in different ways, depending on what a person brings to it. I thought it might be useful to mention this just briefly here. I will come back to this point, in the section I'll call 'cycling through the teachings'.

In this outline, 'three sets of causes, with three results' – I'm thinking of themes that a person either reflects on in an ordered way, following a body of teachings, or has come across in their own life, which give rise to a result for that person, in their own mind and heart.

One of the appeals, for me, of the Stages of the Path teachings, has been that it doesn't seem to be imposing an order on things from the outside, but that, teachers like Atisha, and Lama Tsong Khapa, Gampopa and Patrul Rinpoche are identifying how things work when a person enters any spiritual path, and progresses on it. There is a natural order unfolding here, that I think the authors and teachers of the Lam Rim tradition are referencing. Salutations!

The first set of causes, let us say 4 or 5, are there in the second set, with some added, and then, the first and second set of causes are there in the third as well, again with some added. This will make more sense, hopefully, in a moment.

So, back to my imagined example. A person, let's say, can be hearing the following introductory themes for reflection, in a talk titled from the outside, 'this way to happiness' for the first time.

After the working ground we all share is referenced by the teacher, either briefly, or more thoroughly

Following their guidance, we then reflect on the subjects of:

the preciousness of this human life we have now;

the reality of death and rebirth;

both the evident and the hidden sufferings of samsara, or unenlightened existence,

cause and effect, including teachings on ethics as a way to bring greater peace,

and,

the qualities of the Three Jewels.

The teachings on ethics here can include the Five Precepts: not to kill, not to steal, not to engage in sexual conduct that brings harm, not to lie, and not to take intoxicants.

They can also be framed as the Ten Wholesome ways of acting:

three of body: not to kill, but to protect life; not to steal, but to respect the rights and property of others, and to give generously; and not to cause harm in the area of our sexual relationships, but to respect the relationships and dignity of others;

four of speech: not to lie, but to speak truthfully, not to engage in harsh speech, but to speak gently, not to gossip or engage in meaningless chatter, but to speak meaningfully, and not to cause division with our words, but to refrain from doing so, and to seek to reconcile differences, wherever possible;

and three of mind: to be without anger, cultivating a mind that is loving and kind, to be without greed or possessiveness, but instead to have a mind that is non-attached, and generous, and to become free of ignorance, that is, to develop wisdom.

The teachings on how either suffering or well being arise due to our actions goes all the way to the root of these processes, as described, for example, in the teachings that's called the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination.

Hearing even this much is enough to give rise to any of the different results that can come from interest in, and engagement in a spiritual path.

For clarity's sake however, let's say that a person is really hearing this and having it touch their heart for the first time. The result could be one of both fear – of having an uncontrolled life, and the potentially endless suffering of it, and

simultaneously, of faith that the Buddhas and Enlightened Teachers are offering a way out of suffering, are offering a way to far greater peace, health and happiness.

Having heard this much, with faith that, as the teaching by Lama Tsong Khapa says,

‘there is no assurance that, after this life,
the lower realms do not await you,
but the Three Jewels do have the power to protect you from them’

Thinking about these, and wanting to be safe, and as happy as possible, now and in the future, both for our own sake, and for the sake of others, and having faith, *these are the causes, and the result is taking refuge*, with all the subsequent benefits that follow: safety, happiness, and well being that lead onward to greater fulfillment.

When a person takes refuge, it means that they look to the Buddha as their teacher, the collection of teachings known as the Dharma as the path they aim to follow, and the Noble Sangha as support, guidance and encouragement on the way.

Taking refuge can be done formally, with lines expressing this change of orientation from life-before, as in

I take refuge in the Buddha
I take refuge in the Dharma
and
I take refuge in the Sangha

The essential thing, however, whether the words are spoken or a formal commitment is made, is the rising of the motivation in a person, to follow this path to happiness.

The first of the benefits of taking Refuge, with all that entails, is more happiness, now and in the future, or higher rebirth. Higher rebirth here can mean that even just within this lifetime, one goes from happiness to greater and greater happiness health and peace, because the causes are being cultivated.

That is the first set of causes, and the first result on the spiritual path, that of taking Refuge, as taught in the Stages of the Path.

When one is introduced to Buddhist teachings, there is usually also an introduction to basic methods of meditation, for the sake of calming the mind, and for developing such qualities within ourselves as peace, patience, loving kindness and compassion, sympathetic joy and an impartiality of kindness.

These practices support an ethical way life, and our living in harmony with others. Calm meditation and the development of positive states don't, however, put a complete end to our confusion and afflictive emotions. At best, they can only temporarily attenuate these difficulties. To become genuinely free from suffering, the Buddhist teachings tell us, we need to cultivate insight.

II.

Entering the Path to Complete Freedom from Suffering

Some presentations of the Stages of the Path teachings divide the description of the sufferings of six realms of samsara into two parts: the three lower realms –the hell, hungry ghost and animal realms, and three upper realms, of human life, the devas, and the gods.

Describing rebirth in the lower realms, or states of being as a possibility, as long as one is under the influence of strong negative karma, people are encouraged to take refuge, take up the path, and protect themselves from this happening.

We can then add to the factors covered so far, the teaching that points out that all of samsara, or ego-centered, unenlightened existence is only suffering, and the way that liberation is possible.

The range of what's covered here goes from 'the tip of samsara' – the highest happiness possible in what are called the God realms, to the lowest states. It's pointed out that *all* of this is unsatisfactory, in that there is no lasting peace, or comfort, or safety, as long as one is under the influence of karma and the delusions. Fortunately for all of us, there is a way out.

Understanding these on an intellectual level, when these seem viable to a person, believing in the possibility of liberation, and not wanting to suffer any more, then *these are the causes* for the motivation to be completely and permanently free of samsara to arise naturally in the mind, and the practice of the Three Higher Trainings, of Ethics, Meditation and Wisdom, *and the result which is liberation.*

Because we all want the greatest happiness for ourselves, this is only natural.

As in the first case, I don't divide the path leading to an end from the result itself. My reason for thinking this way is that I have the conviction that, once a person is set on a goal, the steps to that outcome follow naturally. We can even say that, in a way, they are contained in the motivation itself.

Dividing motivation and result even, this is just to clarify the path that most of us find ourselves on, at some point or another. When we have clear goals, and persistence, we will eventually reach our destination. This much I have confidence in.

III.

Entering the Mahayana directly– the Path of Universal Benefit

*Just as I have fallen into the sea of samsara,
so have all mother migratory beings.
Bless me to see this, train in supreme bodhicitta,
and bear the responsibility of freeing migratory beings.*

- from The Foundation of All Good Qualities, by Lama Je Tsong Khapa

*May I always cherish all beings,
with the determination to accomplish for them the highest good,
that is more precious
than a wish-fulfilling jewel*

- from the Eight Verses on Training the Mind

*The moment even one,
fettered and weak in the prison of cyclic existence,
engenders this thought
to become a Buddha,
he becomes a Son of the Sugatas,
and will be revered by both men and gods of the world*

- from A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life, by Shantideva

In addition to the above realizations, when one adds great love and compassion for all that lives, together with the thought that enlightenment is both possible, and is the highest good, so greatly needed in these times, *these are the causes* for the bodhisattva motivation, which is the aim to become a Buddha in order to bring the greatest benefit to all living beings, and the practice of the Six Perfections - Generosity, Ethics, Patience, Joyful Effort, Meditation and Wisdom, *and the result is enlightenment.*

This motivation can, and most often is produced before one has attained states of freedom through calm and insight meditation. For this reason, I refer in this case to ‘entering the Mahayana directly’. The elements of great love, great compassion, and the joyful willingness to work on behalf of others, to bring them happiness, can then be there in all a person does, in all their interactions and in all their spiritual practices.

The alternative to entering the Mahayana directly is to first become free oneself, to some extent, more and more, right up to complete liberation itself, and then, at any point, to take up the Mahayana motivation and cultivate also this all inclusive method side of the path.

All people need wisdom in their lives, and not only the kind that is just common sense, or book learning. More specifically, they need insight into their own nature, in order to become free of not only problems and suffering, but the cause of these as well.

Furthermore, the heart cannot be content with just getting oneself free. As human beings, we need to care for one another, and the path that fulfills this aim, to care for each other well, is one of both love for all others, and the knowledge of freedom.

The person who is in the best position to point these things out to others is clearly someone who has realized them him or herself. Hence, out of love and compassion for others, and understanding the path, the bodhisattva vow arises, which is both the aim and the activities undertaken to become awakened in order to be of the most benefit to others.

This is expressed both by wish,

‘May I become a Buddha,
and bring all others to that same state’,

and by the actions producing this result.

The Traditional verse for taking refuge and generating bodhicitta is

I take refuge in the Buddha,
the Dharma and the Sangha
By the merit I have accumulated
by practicing Generosity and other Virtues,
May I become a Buddha,
in order to benefit all sentient beings

For me, this is the most fulfilling, and the most comfortable path.

Cycling through the teachings

I can imagine two other people happening on this same talk being given, bringing with them different backgrounds than the first person mentioned. I can imagine someone who's heard and connected with these teachings, or ones similar to them, or who has thought through many of these same things, and is at the point where they see the possibility, and feel the urgent necessity in their own life, of gaining freedom from suffering.

If such a person then enters at one point, and hears, for example, the theme of the preciousness of this human opportunity, it can fire him to take advantage of this chance now, while they can, to make progress on the path to liberation.

Another person walking by, can come into the same teaching, at the same point, but bring with them the motivation to work to bring true and lasting health and happiness to all others, by themselves becoming a fully capable being, a Buddha, 'free of all faults and complete in all qualities', as the scriptures describe.

Such a person, hearing the same teaching on this precious human life we now have, can feel that, 'yes, this day, this hour is most precious, because of what can be done with it – I can use it to alleviate suffering, and bring temporal and ultimate happiness to as many as I can!'

The same differences can be found, again, depending on what's already there in the individual mind and heart of the listener, in response to each of the themes that came before (Buddha Nature, and devotion to our teachers) and those that follow:

on death and rebirth, the suffering of samsara, cause and effect, and the efficacy of refuge; the potential for liberation, and the value of ethics, meditation, and wisdom to accomplish this.

Hearing about and reflecting on these can have the effect of either bringing a new motivation to a person's mind, or of enhancing, in the sense of empowering, further clarifying, and strengthening the motivation and the practice of the path that one is already on.

Another example of this: a person with a Mahayana motivation, when looking into the subject of suffering, can think of, and experience these reflections as empowering their compassion.

According to the Lam Rim, the first themes to be thought about deeply on the spiritual path are the great value of our human life, with leisure and opportunity; its impermanence, and its sufferings, and cause and effect. Sometimes these are presented as 'The Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind to Dharma'.

Although these are introductory teachings for someone who's never heard them before, as we go over them again, and reflect on them, our knowledge about the truth of these subjects can deepen, and can be a continuing source of inspiration to us on the path.

I've heard, in a couple of different contexts, that it's not the later, more developed teachings and practices that are all that deep, but the introductory themes – what we share with everyone – that are so profound to think on. The more we look into them, the more we can see how they are really effective for transforming our mind.

In the Stages of the Path teachings, then, we get to be gently reminded that we don't just go through these first subjects once, like checking something off a list, and moving on to other things. Reflecting on these themes, again, and again, and developing our understanding and awareness of them, in fact, remains throughout our life as a foundation. This is the basis for everything else that follows – the seeking, and strengthening of one's sense of refuge, the thought of getting free and the path of liberation, and the motivation and practices that bring enlightenment. It's like when we water the roots of a tree – the leaves, flowers and fruits all flourish.

The reason I refer to three sets of causes, is that, some may get just so far, or hear, or take up, just so much, while another can hear those themes and add to them what follows in the teachings, or in the natural course of unfolding.

This is all right, and natural. Everyone is in a different place at different times in their life and spiritual practice. Here there is, organically, a place for everything, without feeling like it should be one way or another.

I heard a line from a poem that said,
 ‘for the flower,
 every stage of its opening
 is fully blossomed’

I read this as saying that, wherever we are, if it is truly where we should be at that time, has the feeling of right-ness, or completeness to it. There is deep inner peace, richness, joy, and fulfillment. This says something.

The Avatamsaka Sutra says, ‘Every teaching contains all teachings, and all teachings contain each one teaching’. This is why, wherever we are in life and practice, if it’s where we should be at that time, it will feel full, and complete.

The Theravada Tradition doesn’t highlight or draw much attention to the distinction between the Arhat, the liberated person, and a Buddha, as a part of their presentation of teachings, whereas, in the Mahayana, this is done.

There is a teaching in the Nyingma Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism that points to why this may be so. Referencing the Buddha Nature that is in us all, it is said that when the obscurations are removed, then the abundance of our responsiveness and innate good qualities shine forth naturally.

This same insight can equally be applied to Zen practice, where quiet meditation and wisdom are emphasized.

Now I ask, how can we even begin to measure such things? As much as we may love our favorite sutras, or our own preferred approach, when it comes right down to it, frankly, these virtues are beyond any calculation. It could very well be, I’m thinking here, that there is more than one way to the same result, of Full Awakening.

{The following material on what comprises Liberation in the Theravada Tradition is drawn from The Craft of the Heart, by Ajaan Lee, which is freely available online}

In the Theravada, the Path and its Fruits are:

the Stream-enterer - who is someone who has abandoned the fetters of self-view, attachment to rites and rituals, and doubt, and will attain complete liberation after seven lifetimes, at most;

the once-returner, who has in addition weakened the fetters of sensual passion, anger, and delusion, and has just one more rebirth before liberation;

the never returner, who has totally uprooted lust and anger, and will no more take rebirth in this world,

and the Arhat, freed of the first five fetters, mentioned above, as well as those of: a desire for form, a desire for formless phenomena, conceit (as in the sense of construing oneself to be this or that), restlessness, and unawareness.

In this Tradition, this is what defines a completely liberated Sage.

The Mahayana, by contrast, describes the culmination of all practice as Buddhahood itself, ‘the purification of all faults and perfection of all good qualities’, and makes reference to passages encouraging those who have attained the complete peace and bliss of freedom to take up manifesting the work now of helping others to become free.

Given the high status of the Saints in the Theravada, many of whom I feel are already genuine benefactors of humanity, this may be heard just as a delineation of the Mahayanist’s own path, for the sake of their followers, or it can be read as encouragement to those, in any system or approach, to develop to the full, if they haven’t done so already, their love, compassion, and altruistic activity.
How excellent!

From my perspective now, it seems a little like talking about what the view will be like from mountains just barely seen in the distance. There is not much point in discussing such things, much less arguing about, or even denigrating other paths.

What I do know, is that many different Buddhist paths, Theravada, Mahayana, with its sub-divisions, and Zen, as well as other religious traditions, and non-traditions have all produced excellent examples of realized beings, saints and sages. I bow in respect and admiration to them all, and I hope and aspire to learn from them all, and to produce even a fraction of the noble qualities of the saints in this life of mine. Such a life, I'm thinking, would have borne excellent fruit!

One clear advantage to having an outline of the stages of the path is that it reminds us of what is possible, and the way to achieve each of these:

- with the causes of reflecting on the fundamental characteristics of our lives, and the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, the result is taking refuge, with all the advantages that follow;

- with the causes of seeking liberation, and practicing the Three Higher Trainings, the result is liberation,

and,

- with the causes that have been referred to so far, and of great love and compassion that produces the bodhicitta motivation – the aim to become a Buddha in order to bring the greatest benefit to all sentient beings, and the practice of the Six Perfections, the result is enlightenment.

Naturally, the first result, that of taking refuge is the basis of all that follows. It is the foundation of the second result, that of liberation, and, as described in the Stages of the Path teachings, the third result that we can all achieve, that of full enlightenment, is inclusive also of the refuge and liberation that has come before.

The different motivations a person can have on the path at any particular time all result from previous causes being awakened, or established in a person's mindstream.

Motivation is not *what* we do, so much as it is *the reason* we do something, or the response that what we're engaged in elicits in us. Motivation is simply when one feels, 'this is my aim'.

Two ways that having a clear sense of the path factors can be beneficial are, first, that we can then reflect on, nourish and reinforce those factors that strengthen the

motivation that is most meaningful for us, or the one that we want to move towards, and develop more and more in our life.

Secondly, we can use our sense of the goal we have in mind as a reference point, to encourage and empower us, wherever we are, day by day, hour by hour. We can use that aim of ours to make our way most skillfully.

I imagine it being like a person making his or her way through a crowded bazaar. If they know where they are going, they can navigate the twists and turns, never losing sight for long of where they want to go. They can even find shortcuts, based on that clarity of vision.

May all beings find a path suitable to their needs and interests,
May they follow it skillfully,
and swiftly attain the full result of their practice!

...

Resources for the Stages of the Path Teachings:

Gelugpa

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand, by Pabonkha Rinpoche,

How to Meditate on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment,

by Pabongkha Dechen Nyungpo, as found in Heart Advice for Retreat

Illuminating the Path to Enlightenment,

The Way to Freedom, and Becoming Enlightened, by The Fourteenth Dalai Lama,
Tenzin Gyatso

Essence of Refined Gold, by the Third Dalai Lama, with a commentary by the
Fourteenth Dalai Lama

The Path to Enlightenment in Tibetan Buddhism, by Geshe Acharya Thubten
Loden

The Essence of Nectar by Yeshe Tsondru

The Foundation of All Good Qualities,
The Three Principal Aspects of the Path,
and, Lines of Experience, by Lama Je Tsong Khapa

Kagyud

The Gem Ornament of Liberation, by Gampopa

Sakya

The Three Levels of Spiritual Perception, by Dezhung Rinpoche

Nyingma

Words of My Perfect Teacher, by Patrul Rinpoche

Part III. On Wisdom

From a letter - on wisdom and compassion

Cultivated and revealed practice

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.

Cultivated and revealed practice

There are two ways of looking at bringing forth positive qualities from within ourselves. One is to see it as something we are cultivating, something we do, such as working at enhancing our patience, or developing loving kindness, or calm, or mindfulness. Another way is to see it as revealing qualities that we already possess. Here, we just remove what obstructs their manifesting, and these qualities shine forth naturally. There's a truth to both these ways of thinking.

There is something to do, as long as there are qualities, such as wisdom or compassion that we want, and know we need to have more of in our lives. On the other side of it, if we didn't already possess these qualities within us, all the practice in the world wouldn't have any effect. It would be like polishing a chunk of coal, and hoping to change its nature.

In this sense, practice has been described as polishing a diamond – if it were just an ordinary stone, then all the efforts in the world wouldn't reveal any brightness, but because there is this naturally existent value, our efforts do have an effect. Liberation, and the realization of all beneficial qualities is therefore possible.

I can think of three teachers who have spoken very clearly about the relationship between our cultivated practice, and the revealed result. One is Tulku Urgyen, the great 20th Tibetan teacher, another is Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche, and the third is Ajaan Amaro.

Tulku Urgyen, in his book 'Rainbow Painting' compared what he referred to as 'conditioned virtue', with unconditioned virtue, and 'deliberate mindfulness, and effortless mindfulness'

He says,

'There are two types of mindfulness, deliberate, and effortless. By starting out with deliberate attention, the practitioner can make a clear distinction between being distracted or not.'

'...the mindfulness of deliberate attention is essential in the beginning. Otherwise, by relying on only effortless mindfulness, you may not even notice whether you are distracted or not. Instead, it is much better to practice deliberate mindfulness even though it is subtly conceptual, and gradually progress to effortless mindfulness.'

He says that our deliberate mindfulness (which is the cultivated part of practice here) is like pressing a light switch, and that *'Once the light is on, you do not have to keep pressing it.'* He says this about what is revealed, *'The natural state is effortless mindfulness.'* and, *'The nature of mind is naturally awake.'*

He says in this same book that, compared with how we usually view calm and insight, on one level, 'samatha' or calm is *'the innate stability of rigpa'* (our original nature) and that the aspect of insight is the awake, or cognizant quality. (which is, again, effortless, and naturally existent)

How can we tell the difference between the cultivated and the revealed aspects of our practice? The cultivated always has some quality of effort to it – it's conditioned, and something we do, whereas the revealed aspects, by contrast, are effortless – they are just who and what we naturally are.

If we were sitting down, and someone told us to sit down, or standing up and someone told us to stand up, or to go someplace where we were already, we'd have no problem at all in doing that – there'd be no feeling of effort at all, because we are already there. In the same way, when we tap into our inherent nature, of loving kindness, for example, there's nothing more we have to do to improve it in any way, or to make this quality increase.

The profound truth of our nature is described in the teachings as unproduced by our efforts, unblemished, beyond delusion, and, as it is, the source of all good qualities, such as our love, courage, patience, joy, intelligence, and so on. It is what they refer to as our Buddha Nature.

This is our *'original, unborn, and undying wisdom, which radiates all the time'*, says Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche. He says, *'This is the most powerful light. At this moment, the undying flame of wisdom is hidden behind or within our phenomenal conceptions. This inner light resides within us, never dimming, never losing its qualities, never dying out.'*

'Whatever brightness, clarity, analytic energy, or understanding we have actually arise from that original, unborn wisdom. All are none other than the innate nature of our own mind.'

At some point, in the cultivation of mindfulness or loving kindness, or other positive qualities, the practice, we can say, 'does' itself. This is the revealed

aspect, that is without any effort at all on our part. It's then like water flowing downhill. This is something that is supremely easeful, and blissful to experience. This is important to understand at some point, so we don't unnecessarily press, when we don't need to, and so that we can set down any of that basic idea we may have had, that we don't inherently have these qualities.

Another difference between the cultivated and the effortless is that, with the cultivated, there's some sense of an ego, an 'I' doing the practice, whereas the revealed seems more to be without self, non-dual, or, putting it another way, completely beyond the concepts of what we've habitually taken to be 'ourselves' (with all its history, psychology, and so on).

The extent of practice then shifts too, so, for example, when practicing to increase compassion, when the naturally existent comes into it, the result then feels more like what they then call 'non-referential compassion' – or, altogether beyond anything the ego could think up, or do.

Another point: sometimes even a glimpse at the revealed nature can lead onward, to further practice on the conditioned level, of self cultivation. And that in turn leads to a deeper realization of that which is unproduced by our efforts, and so on.

One anonymous poem that I recently heard read by James Baraz said,

'Looking deeply,
love looks back at me;
Looking deeply,
love sees itself;
Looking deeply,
never leaving...'

What effect does this have?

In 'Opening the Hand of Thought', Uchiyama Roshi says,

'From the perspective of conditioned self, original Self represents the direction toward which we should aim. This is the meaning of 'vow'- going in that direction.'

and,

'In the Commentary on the Awakening of Mahayana Faith, we read, 'the true Mind

of every sentient being itself teaches and leads each sentient being. This is the Vow of Buddha.'

'On the other hand, when we consider conditioned self from the ground of original Self, we realize that we are not what we should be. We can't actualize original Self because we are constrained by the handcuffs and fetters of karma. In this frame of mind, we can't help but repent.

'In the very nature of the relationship between original Self and conditioned self, vow and repentance (self- correction) naturally emerge.'

The Thai Forest teacher also Ajaan Maha Boowa has a book called *Wisdom Develops Samadhi*, which describes this process.

He says:

'When samādhi steadily develops due to the use of wisdom (any insight), the samādhi then becomes the basis for further wisdom at a higher level. This latter stage then conforms with the basic principle, that samadhi (in turn) develops wisdom.'

Interestingly enough, there are times when we can sense both the cultivated, and what is revealed at the same time. It can happen when there's a transition gradually taking place in our practice, and this is facilitated by recognizing when it's happening. That's the time, of course, to ease up some, to let go of the making an effort, and just allow what is naturally existent in us to manifest.

This has been likened to the sound of a bell – instead of grasping at it, which would only stop the sound, we just let it ring...

The cultivated leads to the immanent, to our innate qualities being revealed. One approach that makes much use of the idea that we all have all of the sublime qualities within us already, says that *'when the obscurations are removed, then realization dawns effortlessly'*.

and

*The mind is naturally pure,
and only temporarily obscured
by passing conditions*

Practice, they say then, is just aimed at removing what they compare to the clouds, and simply letting the what is likened to the light of the sun in a clear blue sky, effortlessly shine forth.

The third teacher I mentioned who has something to say about the relationship between what I'm calling here the cultivated and the revealed aspects of practice is Ajaan Amaro. In 'Small Boat, Great Mountain', his wonderful book connecting the Theravada Traditions with the Great Perfection teachings, he says

'When we say, "I will now practice loving-kindness" or "I will develop compassion" or "I will keep the five precepts," we overtly take that particular quality as a practice. In fact, what we are really doing is aligning the conditions of our dualistic mind with the reality of our own nature.

We are helping the conditioned be resonant, harmonious with the unconditioned... the natural disposition of the heart is loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity.

These qualities naturally radiate forth when the heart is completely free.

This is not some "thing" that "I do." This is the innate disposition of the pure heart. It's the same with the factors of enlightenment (mindfulness, contemplation of reality, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity).

and,

'We take on certain conventional practices, like calming or brightening the mind, or waking up the mind, but we are just bringing the conditioned realm into alignment with the already existent basic reality. The intrinsic nature of mind is already totally peaceful, totally energetic, and totally awake. That's its inherent nature.

As the Buddha Nature teachings say, *'there is nothing that needs to be removed from this, and there is nothing that needs to be added'*

All the qualities of the Buddhas, and bodhisattvas, are present in our fundamental nature. The Six Perfections are present, and the Four Immeasurables, are spontaneously there.

As Tulku Urgyen said *‘All the great qualities of buddhahood – the wisdom, compassion, and the capability to benefit others- all arise from this original wakefulness.’*

Bodhicitta, a Supreme method, a Supreme result

The utmost conception that I know of that we have of the nature of an enlightened mind and enlightened activity is what is called ‘bodhicitta’. This is the heart-mind that is always totally dedicated to the ultimate benefit of all beings, both as an aim we can take up, and as the highest result and function of practice.

From what’s been said before, we can see how there can be a conceptual aspect to this, and a non-conceptual aspect, which is our original nature, which is there from the beginning, and not needing to be added to or modified in any way.

As before, the conceptual can lead to the innate, to the unfabricated. The purpose then of teachings and practices, including prayers and meditations, are to point this nature out to us, so we can see it, and to help it to awaken in us. By aligning ourselves, on a conceptual level, with this motivation, we create the conditions for just this very nature to manifest. For this reason we can call it a supreme method, having a supreme, and most excellent result.

One part of ‘The Sacred Heart-Essence of the Pith Instructions’, by Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche teaches that:

*The Bodhicitta is like the moon which eliminates darkness;
Bodhicitta is like the all-illuminating sun.
Bodhicitta expels the chronic disease of obscuring emotions;
Bodhicitta protects from the terrors of Samsara.*

*Bodhicitta repels the obstacles of the four demons.
Bodhicitta eliminates the fever of the five poisons.
Bodhicitta acts as the stallion of endeavor.
Bodhicitta is the sturdy armor of patience.
Bodhicitta discards all moral downfalls.*

*Bodhicitta supports the accomplishment of meditative concentration.
Bodhicitta gives birth to excellent tranquility.*

Bodhicitta causes supreme wisdom to arise in the mind.

Bodhicitta perfects the great accumulation of merit.

Bodhicitta brings forth the view of Emptiness.

When Bodhicitta is present, the moon of Skilful Means rises.

If you meditate on Bodhicitta, the sun of Penetrating Insight is evident.

If you meditate on Bodhicitta, Pristine Awareness fully unfolds.

By Bodhicitta, the benefit of others effortlessly arises.'

May we all realize our original nature,
with all it's innate perfection,
and share that with all the world!

Part IV. Entering the World of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

A few thoughts on faith and devotion

Blessings, Faith, and Devotion

From 'Lineage'

Buddhism, Religion, and the Supernatural

Sacred outlook - Seeing beyond ordinary perception

An Introduction to Buddhist Prayer

Great River of Compassion - An Introduction to Mantra for Westerners

Imagine an underwater system of channels

Compassion and Mantra

Things that can be done with mantra

The Resonance of the Saints

The Nature of An Awakened Person

Prayer as Buddha-Activity

Touch the Present, Heal the Past, Create the Future

On Dedication Prayer

Dedication

A few thoughts on faith and devotion

{these are few selections from essays I've written this last year}

For my own purposes, over the years I've come to view faith as an intuition, the knowledge of things not yet proven.

When it comes to faith, if anyone were to ask us how we know some things, or why we are being led to go in a certain direction, there's no answer we can give them that can satisfy either ourselves, or them, but without some amount of faith, our progress will be slow, or non existent.

One of the nice things about getting older is that we can look back on our lives, and, it gets easier to trust our intuition. We can look at times when we knew, without knowing how we knew, and followed that, and only later saw that things worked out, that there was something that matched the feeling we had.

'Faith goes into the spiritual realm, and brings out those things that are already there, where they can be seen.' – Joyce Meyer

If we have faith, we relax on some level. I think of those who are somehow cut off from this faculty, and how they suffer from wanting to know everything in advance. We know with our hearts so much more than can be understood with the intellect.

Faith is also associated with devotion. If faith is trust and reliance, relaxing and believing in something, then devotion acts more like a magnet, drawing what we are devoted to us.

Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche has these beautiful and true things to say about devotion: 'Devotion creates readiness, just as in the Spring the sun and rain make gardens ready to plant seeds and start growth.

'Devotion is the key that opens the door of pure vision. It leads us beyond darkness, doubt and hesitation; it will help us recover from periods of difficulty. Devotion takes us beyond conceptions to an understanding of the true nature.'

If we follow our heart, follow our intuition, with faith, trust and devotion, then we will be led to paths we would never find otherwise, to depth and meaning and fulfillment. This is the ideal.

What we call faith is reflection of the mythic, poetic, and imaginative in us; the ability to have a vision, and to dream; it is linked with the Dionysian, ecstatic, and celebratory...

II.

Part of the problem for us Westerners is our over-reliance on rational thinking. This function has its place, but there are also some things that come to us only through the door of the love, the door of the heart, through faith and intuition, or direct experience. If we rely too much on the intellect here, it blocks us. When we want to know everything ahead of time, or have a logical explanation for everything, we can get in our own way.

I've thought of one analogy to describe both what's true about the rational view and also what it leaves out. It is: a black and white photograph of a color scene - it's true as far as it goes, but, there are many elements that are not seen.

Many spiritual truths don't lend themselves to being contained within concepts, and those who live just in the intellect suffer the loss of so many things, like the perception of beauty, mystery, wonder, intuition, inspiration and delight... These things are seen with the eyes of the spirit, and not with the eyes of the intellect alone.

III.

Ideally, faith, and our critical faculties can compliment each other. When faith is balanced with learning, it tests what we know, as much as we possible. Reason can then be used to highlight, and bring into application those things that are sensed with the intuition.

And when our well developed reason sees that it can only go so far, and that there is more that can be known directly, reason bows to faith and devotion, stands aside, and lets this ability fulfill its function.

Blessings, Faith, and Devotion

The blessings of the Divine, of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Saints, and liberated Sages encircle the globe at all times. Whether or not we are receptive to them, however, or draw these currents to ourselves, depends on our own inner state. This is where faith and devotion come in.

One kind of faith is receptivity. With it, we are open to something greater than ourselves reaching our lives, healing, illuminating, and guiding us.

Disbelief or spiritual pride block the receptivity we could have: Once we've made up our minds that things are a certain way, and that we are without support from the subtle realms, we've removed ourselves from the benevolence that is always here, at least consciously; And whether or not we put it in words, if we hold ourselves as equal to, or better than our wise spiritual guides, ancestors and teachers, we can't receive very much from them. Humility is a prerequisite for learning anything, and never is this more true than when it comes to connecting with the divine in human form, or from the unseen, archetypal levels.

Alone one night, out of distress and shorn of pride, crying out, the hook of our faith can, in that moment, catch a pure force at work everywhere in the world. And our lives can change just like that. We may fluctuate, or even fall away from practice altogether for a time, but a seed of transformation has been planted. The world can become luminous again, larger by an untold measure, as new possibilities dawn.

Once faith has opened the way, and an intimation of a greater love and wisdom has reached us personally, the devotion that is then born is best described as a depth of love and trust that acts as a magnet for blessings. We begin to orient our lives around the sense of the divine wisdom that speaks to us in our own innermost language.

Faith then matures in us to a deep peace that comes from being held in tender, divine care, and from knowing our capacity to grow and change. Such trust in our teacher is also responsive. It strives to be ever more awake, learning the language of the heart that is becoming more sensitive to being guided.

The path develops in this way. We are not alone in our reaching for happiness. On the contrary, this world abounds with grace and blessings. If we are receptive to it, we can know this for ourselves, manifesting beautifully in our lives.

From 'Lineage'

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddasa

Homage to the Blessed One, the Noble, the Perfectly Enlightened One

When I remember something of what we are all heirs to, a new power enters my limbs, and I'm aflush with love and devotion. I am carried along, even as I labor. And how is *that*, exactly? Even I wonder at it, but if you want to know just what result can come from fellowship, and knowing yourself to be part of this family, this lineage, and the inspiration that brings, then I can only advise this: stay here a while, and then look at what is born. Surely we do our ancestors and teachers proud, continuing what they have given us, aiming always to do it justice, and adding ourself to it, as they would have wanted. This love now continues with us, fashioning the best of all gifts for those we meet, and for our children, and our children's children.

Buddhism, Religion, and the Supernatural

Looked at in the light of eternity, some things are easier to approach. Whereas before, our view was too narrow, too taken up with the dynamics of our everyday lives, settling back even for a day, or half a day, opens a more expansive vista on this, our world.

In my twenties, I made a study of Western Esoteric Philosophy, mainly because the world view described there so matched my own experience. Different levels of existence, orders of conscious beings, and divine help that is always available – these were, and continue to be the day to day fabric of my life.

Now, a person discovers very early on when they are out of step with those around them. It's like when a child sees spirits, and assumes everyone else can too, until finding out one day, much to his surprise and dismay, that it is not so. From then on, of course, they lead a dual life – one they can share, and the other that is the world of their inner reality, the way they experience the world.

A person searches philosophies and religions not only to make their way out of confusion and suffering, but also to find some affirmation for their view of the world. If others do have the same view of life as we do, the thinking goes, maybe they also have some thoughts on what our aims should be, and how to make our way here.

The reference point when searching out a religion or a teacher is inside. It is unyielding, some would say stubborn – restless with a kind of divine dissatisfaction towards philosophies or view that don't cut it, impatient even to the point of not bothering to criticize.

This sense of what we really need is something I'm sure we all have, and it is a true compass. On some level we know, this is the most important guiding sense we have. Anything that threatens that, we move against with the force of our whole being.

To turn and face my fellow Buddhists, we do share this wonder, and a reverence for the Founder of our traditions, but each of us do also carry with us, and see the world through a very different world view. Perhaps some good can come from

talking about these differences. This is not to assert the superiority of one over the other, or to proselytize, but to suggest other possibilities as far as looking at our lives here, and particularly at our spiritual life and practice.

In Buddhism, you have to look to the Tibetan Tradition to find a cosmology or world view similar to the Western Esoteric Tradition's understanding. This is not so much the aspect that is emphasized in that school's teachings, but it is the ground, the basis of their ideas and practices. Their overall view pervades everything we find there.

There are oracles, visions, the appeal to saints, and the receiving of blessings from one's teachers, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. That aid and support to a person's spiritual life in this world are the daily bread and the nurturing ground in the Tibetan view.

That this is curtly dismissed in the minds of many Westerners, as primitive, 'magical thinking' is a great loss, as far as I'm concerned.

From what I said earlier, it should be obvious why I feel this way, but here I'll say a bit more about it anyway.

I imagine that if a person in any time and place, endowed with the faculties of faith, intelligence, vigor and persistence, were to search for the truth, that he or she would very likely find it – or at least some level of truth that has been found by other seekers throughout time. There would be nothing surprising about that.

Now, whether we like it or not, and whether we are aware of it or not, those of us living today are all to some extent the products, intellectually, of the so called 'Enlightenment', that rejected a lot of superstition that needed to be cut away, but that at the same time negated the truths and methods of religion as well.

What we were left then with is a mechanical world view, that clings to a part of the truth of things as being its entirety. More is left out of the rational, materialistic view than is included.

There were always, and continue to be now, artists, independent thinkers, mystics and religious, that could never subscribe to such a barren view as this, and yet we find ourselves situated with all the effects of the Enlightenment in our education, economics, media, psychology, and even in our religion.

I understand that, for someone not sensitive to the invisible world, what some people do in their prayer and ritual, with appeals to saints, angels and ancestors, would be at least non-sensical, or worse, an object of scorn. They look down on such people as immature, or fools, misguided, superstitious, or just plain ignorant, and, charitably, to be pitied.

From the other side of it though, those ‘non-believers’, or those without inner vision are blind, and they mislead others.

Who’s to tell what’s going on here? I have my own experiences and ideas and practices to guide me, but for others who may be wondering how to navigate these same straits – I’d suggest two things:

the first is to aim, as much as possible, to have an open mind. This means having a mind that is capable of learning.

My second suggestion is to study, as much as you can, how other people have made sense of life in this world. This will, at least, help develop a tolerance for others views. At best, it will open you to a greater experience of this one life we share.

Which brings me to Western Buddhism today, and the way it is being transmitted and understood in America, circa 2013.

There is not yet a Buddhism here that includes the realities of other dimensions of existence, of Saints and Enlightened Beings. We can’t quite borrow the Tibetan view, as much of their philosophy derives from the place they came from. Neither can we look entirely to Western religions because of elements that many, myself included, can’t entirely accept.

And yet realities, and people’s experiences being what they are – that is, messy, but having their own logic to them – transcend systems of thoughts. So we do need to somehow accommodate these experiences, or we are the lesser for it.

I’m in the middle of reading a book called ‘The Good Heart’, which is His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s explanation of Christian scripture. As I’m reading, two themes keep emerging for me. One is the saying that, ‘truth is one, but people call it by different names’. The other thought I’ve been having is one the Dalai Lama has made reference to many times over the years, and, that is, that the Western Sources are closer at hand, and more accessible for most people here.

So where does that leave a Western Buddhist in the twenty-first century?

Like many other people here, I have a great respect and admiration for the teachings of Jesus. And more than that even, I feel a natural closeness and devotion to Him, as a Bearer of Light, as one who sustains us through hard times; as a Healer, and True Guide. From what I can tell, He is not the only form of truth and help, as most Christians assert, but He is no less true, powerful, and holy because of that.

He is on my altar, right along side the Buddha, surrounded all around by the images of Saints, Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

I know some purists would say, well, that's not Buddhism as the Founder taught it, and I don't want to argue, but, if enlightenment is the aim, then any way to get there is fair game, no?

And if our purpose, as brought out in the Mahayana, is the benefit of all beings, then the vision of a world in which there are many enlightened beings is something to be celebrated as helping us to accomplish our aims.

I'm a big believer in the power of prayer as a way to open ourselves to receiving blessings, and as a way to help others. Prayer comes naturally for Christians, but less so for us Buddhists. At least, it's not talked about as much, and, I suspect, it's not something we avail ourselves of as much as we could. It need not be this way. As Ani Tenzin Palmo said, since help is available, then why not call on that help?

There is more to be said, but maybe this is enough to point in the general direction I think is missing and very much needed in today's world, with its problems, and Traditions, and sincere, open minded practitioners.

May all be well. May all be blessed.

May whatever methods people take up, swiftly and easily lead them all to the fulfillment of their aims.

Sacred outlook - Seeing beyond ordinary perception in modern culture, and American Buddhism

'Beware of confining yourself to a particular belief and denying all else, for much good would elude you – indeed, the knowledge of reality would elude you. Be in yourself for all forms of belief, for God (Truth) is too vast and tremendous to be restricted to one belief rather than another.' - Ibn 'Arabi

{I write this for myself, and my family; Here is the great 'what if it is so?' ...}

So much of our pessimism and despair comes from the limited views we that hold of ourselves and this world that we live in. This is not entirely our own fault. It comes as well from our culture and upbringing.

We would expect that religions, such as Buddhism, would offer an alternative to the one dimensional world of consumerism and competition, and to the flat, affect-less life of scientific rationalism. Instead we find that Buddhism is often presented strictly as another philosophy, or just as psychology, and divorced from many of the elements that would classify it as a religion. This is understandable- to a point. Many people come to Eastern religions because Christianity and Judaism didn't work for them. And what's worse, they've had those teachings proselytized at them by arrogant, narrow minded fanatics.

We like to joke that many American Buddhists are in recovery from Western religion. For many, the straightforward, practical teachings on how to take care of our minds are of great appeal and benefit. This is all good, but, if this is all it is, there are some profound and precious things that are being left out of our understanding of ourselves, and our world and of Buddhist teachings.

One of the great things about these times is that we are able to look at how other people received and practiced these teachings. One thing we can notice is that the starting place for many other people, in other cultures and times, has been very different than our own.

In most places, Buddhism is a tradition that is alive with wonder, rich with the presence of the sacred, and with the guiding influence of Enlightened beings. Here are a couple of quotes from modern teachers: The first is by Ani Tenzin Palmo, a British born nun, ordained in the Tibetan Tradition. She says, 'We are not alone. This universe is full of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who are on our side. And, as is

known in all Buddhist countries, although it is not always emphasized in the West, we can pray to them.’

And Lama Zopa Rinpoche has said: ‘You are not alone because all the time there are numberless buddhas and bodhisattvas surrounding you, loving you, guiding you, that is what they do....’

Now, if we compare this way of thinking to the general way people view themselves and this world, and the way that Buddhism is usually taught in the Theravada and Zen centers in America, there is a very great difference. One perspective says that we’re pretty much on our own. Another perspective says that there are many enlightened beings we can call on, and that can help us. Now, suppose for a moment, What if this were so?

If this is true, as I think it is, then we’ve reduced our view of this world and ourselves, our traditions, and our options, and this is surely a great loss to us all. What we have when this is the case is a tradition that has been greatly dis-empowered, and therefore generations of students, and those they are connected with, are being deprived of very great benefit.

I recently heard an interview with Sister Joan Chittister, where she said that the maps we use are important, because they are what will be followed by future generations to make their way in the world.

My world is rich, but many modern day Buddhists don’t share this view, and they explicitly or tacitly deny so much of our potential and possible experience. There are abundant resources available by which we can actualize our aims, and if these are not taken advantage of, then it’s like going hungry, and having our whole family go hungry, while there are fields nearby that can satisfy those needs. It is such an unnecessary tragedy to not see this much.

Ani-la added that: ‘This is not being theistic – this is being practical. If there’s help out there, why not invoke that help?..

May we all be well and happy

May we all awaken to the blessings that are continually here for us!

In a rich world view, Saints, Buddhas, Enlightened Intelligence, Bodhisattvas, and Divine help are available. If we don’t know this much, then what are we left with?

– a string of doctrines, and we’re on our own? No! Our lives, our world, our Traditions hold inconceivably so much more than that! And while it’s true that not everyone can perceive these things, or has an affinity with thinking this way - this is how it is in the world - they should at least consider the possibility of help from these sources. And they should at least not dissuade others who can draw great benefit, solace and inspiration from the presence of enlightened beings in their world view.

Another thing that leads people to reject all religious views is that prayers or the methods used don’t always work in the way they want them to. It’s the truth that many factors are involved either in bringing a result, or when something does not work. Our lives have this inconceivable complexity to it, as much as we may want to over-simplify things. I can say with many others that the sum of it is beyond me. What then to do?

Where the methods, and the views they are based on enter into it, and I think the reason they shouldn’t be rejected outright, but taken up where and when we can, is that they are born of our collective instinct for knowing, and for making things right in our lives. These are methods that have been re-affirmed in every generation. They are our inherited wisdom of what has worked in the past, very often beyond anything that was thought possible.

Let’s look at this together. This is how it is in these times: the common, mundane perceptions we live with and pass around are really more accurately de-valued, degraded views, of ourselves, each other, and our world. This reaches these days, unfortunately, even into how religions traditions are taught and received.

I wrote this poem a few days ago:

A grey scale teacher
splashes his grey scale paint-views
onto everyone and everything
They are a danger!

There is no joy there,
no color,
little depth of feeling,
little or no poetry or wonder,
richness or inspiration

Deprived themselves,
they deprive others...

Part of the problem for us Westerners is our over-reliance on rational thinking. This function has its place, but there are also some things that only come to us through the door of the love, the door of the heart, through faith and intuition, or direct experience. If we rely too much on the intellect here, it blocks us.

I've thought that one analogy that works to describe both what's true about the rational view and what it leaves out is: a black and white photograph of a color scene. It's true as far as it goes, but there are many elements that are not seen.

Another analogy I thought of is this:

If we look at an ocean through a pinhole,
what we see
is a pinhole's worth of the ocean
It's like this.

Many spiritual truths don't lend themselves to being contained within concepts, and those who live just in the intellect suffer the loss of so many things, like the perception of beauty, mystery, wonder, intuition, inspiration and delight... These things are seen with the eyes of the spirit, and not with the eyes of the intellect alone.

Another element that plays into a common, mundane view is our pride. Every tradition, and common sense too tell us that humility is necessary for learning. It would be one thing if we knew we were arrogant, but when even this much self knowledge is lacking, it's really hard to learn from our teachers, this world, and our deeper nature. This is related to our receptivity. We can say: great humility, great receptivity; small humility, small receptivity; and no humility, then no receptivity whatsoever...

From culture comes a self created world view, and self fulfilling prophecy

{Here is a sketch of how de-valued, ordinary perceptions of ourselves and our world develop, and how they can be undone. Like any sketch, it leaves out many things, but hopes to catch enough of the essential structure of what's going on to communicate its message.}

We live in a culture and a time that is lacking in its sense of the sacred. Wherever the best of human values are not given enough attention, or where religious culture is mocked or ignored, and where a sense of the beautiful is overridden by the volume and quantity of meaningless things, then we become inwardly impoverished.

We live in grossly materialistic times, that deny of the existence of everything beyond the reach of our ordinary five senses. Be assured, this has not always been the case in other times and cultures.

We may pride ourselves on having gotten over what we haughtily call 'infantile' views, of a spiritual world, or any higher order than what the average person can see. We denigrate 'magical thinking' as naïve, uneducated, false and misleading. We're so proud of our reasoning and science, and we set that as the standard for everything.

Modern consumer culture then isolates people, and over time, the human connections we all need grow thin. We become suspicious of our neighbors and friends, and set apart from family. The prevalent perspective is actually nihilistic, life denying, a tragic distortion of who and what we are.

The views many of us have inherited, just by the fact of having been born here, are then reinforced by our emotional reactions, which are then reflected back to us as appearances that are colored or tainted by our own minds. If our mind is not dealt with skillful, a patina can cover everything. What all this adds up to is a disempowered view of what it is to be alive, to be a human being in this precious world of ours.

Collective views are shared in mostly unnoticed ways. They are pervasive, and are the ground of our sense of the choices we have, for change or development, or to remedy the problems we face.

To counteract this perception (or rather, misperception) we should be able to recognize diminished values, and degraded views wherever they exist, in ourselves, our family and neighbors, and in the world, so that we can replace them with something truer, something ever closer to the ideal. At the very least, our religions traditions and philosophies should offer us an alternative to nihilism. Life is available, and someone should say it out loud.

To love is to begin to remember who we are

What is it that brings light back into our lives? What will cause us to see ourselves and our world as it really is? Where will we find strength for all we need to do, and vision, and grace? Everyone, no matter whether they are affiliated with a tradition or not, can love. It can be a love for family, for art, for nature, for our teachers, for our young...

Love is the eye that sees beauty. In that one virtue there is light, and strength. There is daily food for the journey, courage and healing. We can add to this affection for our world a basic practice of meditation that quiets and clarifies the mind. Together, these two can enhance and deepen each other.

We struggle more than we need to, when we do everything but our inner work. That, we give short shrift. But this is that 'one needful thing'.

With love, and regularly taking time for meditation and self cultivation, as a basis, and a way of life, we can begin to appreciate what Traditions offer, their great gift to us all.

In Tibetan Buddhism, basic ignorance manifests as what they call 'impure perception', or 'ordinary perception', or the mundane view of the world that we carry with us, and this is seen as the root cause of how we limit ourselves and suffer.

The opposite of this is called an enlightened view, pure perception, or sacred outlook. This is a way of experiencing the world as essentially divine in nature, having great beauty and potential.

The following principles go beyond Buddhism alone, to reflect something of what is seen and lived with in other Traditions as well, and in the lives of contemplatives. They stand in radical contrast and in eternal opposition to the common, mundane view. Here are few tenets of a magical world view, pure perception or sacred outlook:

that all life is sacred;

that the Divine, freedom and peace, the Kingdom of Heaven, is within us all

that our fundamental nature is pure

therefore, that we all have the potential to become free from suffering and attain happiness; we can accomplish great benefit for ourselves and others

that this world is sacred, alive and responsive, and that we are inseparably connected to it;

that we are always connected to each other, to our whole family

that there are other worlds, other realities

that there are many levels of beings, seen and unseen

that we are not alone in this world

that there are powers we can call on, Saints and Saviors, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Ancestors, and divine beings that will respond and help

that we are multi-dimensional beings, and so, things such as distant viewing, absent reading, and distant healing are possible

that there are faculties beyond the ordinary that can be developed, each according to our unique temperament and gifts, but to some extent by everyone

that prayer is effective

that ritual works

that mantra works

An enlightened world view, however we come to it, offers us spiritual food, expansive vistas, and the means to accomplish our aims; it offers us support, whenever and wherever it is needed most.

I find such views closer to the truth of how things are. Whatever methods we then use, there is a workable operating basis for living, full and rich. We are empowered by such views, and the heritage of our great resources is again, as ever, open to us.

From an enlightened perspective of this kind, the spiritual practices we do, such as study, meditation or prayer, aim to clear away what keeps us from knowing the

truth about ourselves, and our lives here; the fullness of the gifts our teachers and benefactors have given to us, and what we have to draw from to act, to set things right as much as we can here in this world.

May we all awaken to our true heritage,
and live lives of generosity,
great joy, and fulfillment,
of great peace, well being,
and benefit to all!

An Introduction to Buddhist Prayer

In America, and in the West in general these days, people don't usually associate Buddhism and prayer. We usually think of Buddhism as a tradition that teaches quiet sitting meditation, and it is certainly that. Right below the surface, however, we find that there is a great deal of prayer in Buddhism. Some schools, such as Zen, may seem to use prayer in the usual sense only sparingly, while others, such as the Tibetan tradition use a wide range of prayers for different purposes. There are prayers for healing, for cultivating compassion and other qualities; prayers to pacify difficulty, and prayers invoking the blessings of our teachers, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, for support in all aspects of life.

To say what Buddhist prayer is, we would have to include two things: generally speaking, what Buddhism is, and, the nature of prayer.

First, a few words on the nature of prayer

What all prayer has in common, whether it is Buddhist prayer, or theistic prayer, is that **prayer expresses a world view**.

Whether a person believes in God, or in angels, or in the intercession of Saints; or in the existence of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, prayer shows what a person believes in.

Even more simply with some people, praying shows their belief that prayer works for them, even if they don't understand completely *why* it works. We don't need to have a lot of philosophy behind it. If a person has some experience of prayer being effective for them, that is enough to get them to pray.

A universal human activity

It's clear that people worldwide pray for all kinds of things. It seems to be a completely universal human activity: for example, parents pray for their children, without having to be taught; people everywhere pray for good crops, and for safe journeys. I've heard one definition of prayer as 'a heart-wish'. In this sense, even atheists pray. And if there is a religious world view, then that is the form in which the prayer gets expressed.

As it is usually defined, prayer is reaching beyond what we usually think of as ourselves to receive support, grace and blessings from some benevolent power in the universe. It could be for ourselves, or for another, for a child or friend, or for the world. It is entirely natural, and spontaneous. It is the human expression of some need, or of gratitude.

Two kinds of prayer beyond words

In a brief overview of prayer, finally, there are two kinds of activity that need to be mentioned here, that are sometimes referred to as prayer, even though they don't follow the most known about pattern of using words. These two are: silent prayer, and, what can be called 'prayer-in-action'

The term silent prayer may be familiar to those who have studied Christian contemplation. Sometimes called 'the prayer of the heart', or 'practicing the presence of God', silent prayer can be a form of adoration, of thanksgiving, or it can be sitting quietly, with receptivity, a deep listening for guidance or for the answer to some problem.

A second type of prayer that may not usually be classified as such is sometimes called 'prayer-in-action'. This is where it is not enough to wish for something, or to hope and pray for something with words alone, but, when the opportunity arises, to sit still, or to speak, to recite, or to chant, or to move our limbs. This is inspired action, not separate from our prayers of aspiration. Here, there is a clear continuum between our thought and action. The same power flows through them, from the same original intention.

In both of these, silent prayer, and in prayer in action, there is experience on a level beyond words. Such prayer-fulness is then the state of a person's whole being, an expression of values, and an expression of their faith. Of course it will remain the case that most of what people identify as prayer uses words, but this dimension of prayer is also fully deserving of our recognition and respect. The deeper, more encompassing definitions will always be there, for anyone who wants to pick up on them.

The second part of introducing Buddhist prayer, after speaking of prayer in general, would have to be to say something about what Buddhism is. Buddhism is a way to live life with greater wisdom and compassion. Its teachings concern the nature of suffering, and propose a path that leads to the absolute end of suffering,

and to genuine happiness. This is accomplished through meditation and insight into our nature.

Prayer comes into the picture as soon as we start to consider the role of cultivated thought and intention in the spiritual life. Buddhism teaches training the mind, and one of the ways we can do this is by learning to direct our thoughts in a positive direction, away from harming others, and towards actions that benefit. Prayers of aspiration can set our motivation for a session of meditation, for a day, or for our whole life. Examples of this might be for a person to pray, ‘May I keep pure ethics today’, or ‘May I give up that habit’.

As with other kinds of prayer, the different kinds of Buddhist prayer express a set of values and a world view. **Buddhist prayer, then, is prayer informed by a Buddhist world view.** In every case, it is made up of a sense of where we are, and of the resources that are available to help; by what is going on and what is needed in the world and in the lives of living beings. It should be noted here that there is more than one valid, workable Buddhist world view.

A note on a Tradition that is beyond being theistic or non-theistic

In contrast to Western theistic prayer, Buddhism does not make use of the idea of a creator God. This is one significant difference. There are, however, many forms of Buddhism that recognize the existence of different levels of beings, such as devas, guardians, and local spirits. Many practitioners recognize and call upon the power and benevolent influence of our spiritual ancestors, present day teachers, as well as different levels of spiritually accomplished beings, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche has said, ‘You are not alone, because all the time there are numberless buddhas and bodhisattvas surrounding you, loving you, guiding you, that is what they do...’

It may also come as a surprise to Westerners that, by sheer numbers, the great majority of people who refer to themselves as Buddhist practice what is called Pure Land Buddhism. Most of the Buddhists in Japan, Korea, and China, as well as many Tibetan Buddhists pray with great devotion to Amitabha Buddha – the Buddha of Infinite Light. Many millions of people recite his name-mantra ‘Namo Amitabha’ or ‘Ami-tofu’ and pray to be born after this life in his Pure Land of Sukhavati. This is regarded as being a heavenly realm, with ideal conditions for spiritual practice.

I think then that it's not enough to refer to Buddhism as merely non-theistic, and leave it at that. It is clearly not monotheistic, but it is, I would add, grounded in spiritual realities. Perhaps a better pairing then would be theistic and recognizing a diversity of spiritual life.

Generally speaking, theistic prayer is where you view the source of benefit as existing outside of oneself, and non-theistic prayer regards the sources of benefit as existing in oneself, or both outside and inside oneself.

In Buddhism it's taught that ultimately the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and our own teachers are not separate from our own minds. Relatively, however, on the path we usually experience them that way, and so we can benefit from connecting with them and relating to them within that framework, as we develop a deeper realization of enlightened qualities.

One of the ways of relating to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas is as a method of cultivation, where the 'external' and the internal complement each other. Here, one meditates upon a Buddha form with devotion and prayer, as a way to identify and to produce these same qualities in ourselves. The forms are used to help us to awaken our own Buddha Nature.

It's often asked: does the deity (Buddha or Bodhisattva) have an external reality?, and answered, relatively, yes; ultimately, no (meaning that they are not separate from our fundamental nature).

The reason I would first begin by describing *all* Buddhist Prayer at this point as the expression of diverse people's world view is to try to be as inclusive as possible. The truth be told, looking at the range of what is taught and practiced as Buddhism, there is simply no one way. Some people relate to the world as having many dimensions, and many spiritually advanced beings, and others just to this one world that we more or less agree on. No matter. Many different cosmologies or world views can work when it comes to Buddhist practice, or to the activity of prayer. However our mind is, there is benefit to be found in prayer.

Take, for example, the wish, 'May you have happiness', or the verses for the cultivation of loving kindness and compassion, 'May all beings be happy', 'May all beings be free from suffering'. These are purely prayers of aspiration, and no faith is required in anything, beyond recognizing the power of love and compassion, and of our own thought and motivation.

From my own point of view, more important than the philosophy of prayer, is what all these practices point to – in whatever form we engage them they indicate the possibility of working with our heart and mind, and the possibility of transformation, benefitting ourselves and others. If we think prayer is something that could help us to accomplish this, there is plenty of room to have different world views and still have it work.

One example of a prayer that can work with different Buddhist world views, perhaps, would be recognizing that ethical action brings happiness, and unethical or hurtful action brings misery. We can then aspire or pray to live a moral life. Then, if our world view in addition includes the existence of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (highly realized beings that live to serve others, freeing them from suffering and bringing them happiness) or a connection to teachers, then naturally we will ask for their help and support. (...May my teachers, and the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas help me to accomplish this...)

Another example of a Buddhist prayer and world view would be that elemental universal wish for our children or family to have happiness: if this is informed by an understanding of the causes of happiness as taught in Buddhism, ethics, the training of the mind, or meditation, and wisdom, then that wish for them in that sense becomes a Buddhist prayer. It reflects a Buddhist world view and understanding.

Again, if we include in our view the dimension of the existence of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and the blessing power of Saints and Sages, then, naturally, we reach to these sources of light and inspiration in our prayers, with the deep wish that they benefit those we pray for.

Here is a third example of what Buddhist prayer can be: by contrast, the peace of someone who has only known the effect that comes from taking a sleeping pill, and the peace of someone who has quieted the mind in meditation are very different. When a meditator or contemplative wishes for another to know peace and happiness, they have in their mind the inner peace and joy they have known. Such prayer is informed by their experience, the result of their Buddhist study and practice.

Buddhist prayer is the expression of what is felt by Buddhists to be ultimately worthwhile in life, and here is where another level of interest enters into it, if we want to know what many Buddhists are actually aiming to do when they pray.

All Buddhist prayer is informed by a Buddhist world view, on the nature of suffering and the path to happiness; of the preciousness of each life, and of our own potential. A fundamental prayer we can have from this perspective is 'May all beings have happiness, and the causes of happiness'.

Then, if we are practicing taking care of our own life in the Buddhist way, by cultivating ethics, meditation and the freedom that comes with wisdom in the Buddhist sense, one result of whatever liberation we achieve is naturally a greater dedication to all others. This arises naturally - it does not have to be imposed from the outside. This is how the path unfolds.

Beyond the level of obscuration and affliction, our nature *is* compassion. From greater freedom, and greater empathy, our compassion can emerge. We can begin to recognize the fundamental equality of all, and to live our lives in response to that.

Enter the Maha-yana

What is called the Maha-yana, means the Great Way, in that, in its wish to benefit others, it aims to include *all* beings. A Mahayana Buddhist, in the best sense, sees that what we all need for our flourishing is something more than the material alone. What we need, ultimately, for our happiness and well being, is wisdom.

The Mahayana Buddhist Way of Life is in many ways the complete opposite of self centeredness, and of short sighted, hedonistic, materialistic culture.

It is mature prayer. It is altruism. And although it includes ourselves, it is living in response to the needs of the world and of living beings. It is a willingness to give one's life to that task of freeing all others from suffering and to bringing them all genuine happiness. Such a motivation places us in harmony with all life.

This perspective, of wanting to benefit all others, is more than a reflex, or a superficial emotional reaction. It is the result of contemplation, and an open hearted response, seeing our place in the world of struggling, suffering sentient beings.

As Shantideva wrote: 'Although they long for happiness, they destroy the very causes of their happiness; and though they do not wish to suffer, they create the

causes that bring suffering on themselves...’ Such contemplations can shift the very center of our life.

Every Mahayana Buddhist, then, embraces what is called the Bodhisattva Vow as the highest ideal and aspiration: to free each and every sentient being from suffering and the causes of suffering, and to bring them all to immutable happiness. We aim all of our maturation, our thoughts and actions, prayers and meditations to that objective, of benefitting all others in every way necessary, material and spiritual.

This Bodhisattva Vow, and bodhicitta – the thought Traditionally expressed as, ‘May I become a Buddha in order to benefit all sentient beings’, is a dependent arising. These causes and conditions come together: our perceiving the needs and seemingly endless sufferings of living beings, with compassion, and knowing a way out, naturally Vow arises from these.

Traditionally, as taught in the Tibetan Buddhism, before any practice, we set our motivation. We have the thought, ‘May this be for the benefit of all...’ and this is the great motivation that empowers the prayers and meditations of a Mahayanist.

After that, during the practice itself, whatever it is, we aim to keep a clear continuity of intention. And at the conclusion we dedicate the merit, the positive energy of our practice, to fulfilling our purpose, for example,

‘By this practice, may all beings enjoy happiness, and the causes of happiness...’ When it comes to the activity of prayer, then, we can view Buddhist Prayer in terms of **path**, which is the cultivation of some motivation or quality, and in terms of **fruit**, which is what we give as a result of our practice.

Prayer **as a path** can be training the mind in ethics, or in loving kindness. We can reflect and cultivate the feeling, for example: ‘Meeting this person tomorrow, may I have patience, and not get angry with them. May I develop the qualities that will help them as much as I can.’ In some places, this is called prospective memory. As Matthieu Ricard taught, doing such meditations ahead of time that cultivate a positive quality, ‘prime’ us, or prepare us to engage with others in a better way.

Some people may wonder if prayer takes the place of meditation that calms the mind and by developing wisdom frees us from afflictions – meditation that has for millennia been regarded as the very heart of Buddhist practice. But it isn’t the case that prayer replaces meditation, rather, at it their best, the practices of prayer and

meditation are complementary to each other. With prayer we direct our mind and energy, and with calm meditation that liberates we can connect with and uncover more of our resources. We are able to offer something deeper and more useful.

In its broadest sense, prayer can be considered to be another name for Buddha Activity.

Buddhist Prayer **as fruit** then can be offering our light, and our peace to the world. This, at its best, can be a whole way of life for a Mahayana Buddhist.

A Bodhisattva delights in benefitting others, seeing this as the most meaningful use of our life. No matter how difficult it is, no matter how long it takes, no matter what the cost... The scope of this work is expressed in The King of Prayers, which has a verse that reads:

Limitless is the extent of space
 Limitless is the number of sentient beings
 And limitless are the karma and delusion of beings
 Such are the limits of my aspirations.

And by Shantideva, who has the prayer:

For as long as space endures
 and for as long as living beings remain,
 until then, may I too abide,
 to dispel the misery of the world

The Lam Rim Dedication has this verse:

With my heart going out with great compassion
 In whatever direction the most precious teachings have not yet spread,
 or once spread have declined,
 May I expose this treasure of happiness and aid

Cultivating this path, we become more able to intrepidly engage and to guide others.

In nearly every school of Buddhism, understanding the mind has a central place. The power of thought, and in particular the power of intention is expressed in the line by Lama Zopa Rinpoche, that: 'All of existence depends on the tip of a wish'.

Thought is the power we use to shape our lives. ‘The tip of a wish’ here refers to our motivation. One teaching says if the root of a tree is healing, the branches, leaves, flowers and fruit will all be healing. Again, it is brought out that our motivation is the deciding factor in the quality of our work, our spiritual practice, and in what we give to the world.

As with meditation and mantra practice, an individual’s prayer can become a cultivated power. We don’t know what we are capable of, and what effect our own meditation and prayer can have until we make an effort.

It’s also true that the Traditional prayers we have received can be a great aid to our lives. Prayers that have been recited by many people for generations, with concentration and devotion, have built up tremendous power over time, and if we can connect with them, they can help us a great deal. Add to this the fact that many of the Traditional prayers were written by people who are regarded as saints, such as Shantideva, Atisha, Tang Tong Gyalpo, and Tsong Khapa, as well as modern teachers such as Thich Nhat Hanh, Dudjom Rinpoche and Lama Zopa Rinpoche. As such, they are rich with insight, and blessings. Together with our own practice of having a good heart, meditation and prayer, we can gain the greatest benefit from Traditional prayers.

For some, to be a self defined ‘person of prayer’ can be a complete way of life, responsive and awake. Prayer can connect us to the Divine. It affirms our connection with each other. It can engage our creativity in the moment, connect us to Traditions, and help us to meet both suffering and joy. Prayer gives us a means to respond, and to offer, if not an immediate solution to problems, then at least solace, and hope, and the best we can give at this time, not turning away in spirit.

Seeing for ourselves the great value and effectiveness of prayer, who would not want to engage its practice in some form? It is completely natural to want to do so, especially when we see more and more of the needs that exist, and what can be done with prayer. We can direct our mind to virtue, link up with and draw from sources of great benefit, and share that with all. May all beings benefit.

Great River of Compassion

An Introduction to Mantra - for Westerners

Avalokishvara, help me to say this rightly, for all who could benefit from it.

Mantra:

I: A set of sacred syllables, repeated to attain a spiritual benefit

II. (from the Sanskrit.): A 'tool for thinking'. 1. Prescribed syllables (in Sanskrit) to protect the mind (from defilements). They express the essence of specific energies. The recitation of mantras is sometimes done with specific visualizations. 2. Often, Mantra is used as a synonym for Vajra, or Tantra (as in 'Mantrayana' - the path of mantra).

In thinking about writing this introduction, I've tried to bring to mind the most commonly asked questions about mantra practices.

I know, first off, that most people have no interest in this subject, feeling completely sure (for some reason) that these practices don't work, and that it's a meaningless subject for them to learn anything about.

A second, much smaller group tend in the opposite direction - without trying things, they believe what they hear. They 'take it on faith', or because it sounds reasonable, or because it fits with their world view of what's possible.

Both of these extremes, of tending toward credulity, or a pre-judged disbelief, would have to be set aside, before anything new can be learned, especially when it comes to more recondite subjects - where there is a lot that is hidden, or subtle - outside the range of our usual perceptions.

Instead of believing or not believing from the outset, perhaps someone new to this subject could listen to these ideas more as an invitation, to try some of these practices, or to see things in a different way.

I hope in these pages to be able to share some basic information, and to offer as much as I can in the way of warm encouragement to practice.

The effects can really be great, profound and life-altering. They can change what we think of as ourselves, and what we think of as ‘a human being’. As Rumi said, “Human beings are mines...”

We have all these riches inside us. All these potentials. May they manifest effortlessly in whatever way, and as much as necessary for the benefit of living beings.

Imagine if someone told you that you had a pot of gold right around the corner from where you are standing, in your very own backyard. Whether or not you knew this person, it would at least be worth a look. If they even said that you had a single gold coin, most of us would at least look. The usefulness of money is something we can all relate to - ‘no harm in trying’, we’d say.

And yet, compared to the claims that are made about the power of mantra, the usefulness of money is limited, almost nothing.

There are other kinds of wealth near at hand that we can have access to and make use of.

Our body contains medicine

When we’re first introduced to the idea that there are healing properties within our body and mind, that can be contacted and increased, we might be surprised. After all, it goes against everything we’ve been taught about who we are - and these beliefs can be quite solid.

If someone says to you that your body contains healing properties that can be awakened and increased, it’s like being told that there’s gold nearby, in your own yard. First, you’d want to know where, and second, how much! Well, the teachings on mantra provide the ‘where’ - the directions, if you will, to inner treasures.

As far as the ‘how much’, I’ll repeat what tradition teaches, and that is, that it depends on the person and the practice itself what will come about. As always, there is the invitation to practice, to experience and see for yourself, along with the

encouragement that these practices could be of great benefit to yourself and others.

If you find you are interested, then please do give these practices a fair try, in terms of time and effort, as it's said, 'to awaken the energy of the mantra'.

Working from two directions

Let's say you want to cultivate compassion. You may choose to recite the compassion mantra, OM MANI PEME HUM.

An experience like this may follow: you can feel peaceful, and

have a warm feeling. You may see light like sunlight, rising from within. You may want to share that feeling or express that feeling in some way...

While reciting, you may pause, and say, "may all beings be happy", "may all beings be peaceful...", or make prayers of that nature.

The feeling then can be somewhat different - as if you are using a different part of the mind to cultivate good-will, love and compassion.

Reciting the mantra, you can have the feeling arising from within, surfacing, as it were, from the depths. And then, praying, or thinking May all beings be happy, from a contemplative level of mind, deeper than ordinary thinking, you may feel this same feeling is both being cultivated or awakened by your prayer, and also changing your surface thought and feeling.

Two explanations for why mantra works at a deeper level

It's taught in both the Indian and Tibetan traditions that the sounds of the syllables of mantra themselves have power. They embody, or express, or *are* the quality that we aim to produce, experience, or cultivate. The sounds *are themselves* the quality we aim to experience, and to make use of to benefit self and others. This is one explanation.

The other explanation is that, through use over generations, mantras have been associated with qualities, or states of consciousness. And when we repeat the syllables of a mantra, we 'tap into' a reservoir of particular life-energy, or power that has been built up over time.

Either way, if it works, that itself is proof enough. We really don't need a theory,

though it may clarify some of what goes on. Personally, I feel there is truth in both explanations as to why mantra works.

Often when we read about the use of prayer or mantra, we read extraordinary statements - far from our usual world view. And I must say, in all honesty, that there is something in mantra that is beyond description, and that needs to be mentioned.

More food for thought - On world view

I recall reading early books about Tibetan Buddhism (the branch of Buddhism where mantra has flourished). They referred to the Tibetan Tradition as “Magical Buddhism”, and in a way they were right.

The starting point for much of the prayer, visualization and mantra in the Tibetan Tradition is what can be called a magical world view.

A magical world view, wherever it is found:

- asserts levels of reality beyond the physical world
- and that there can be interaction between the different levels
- in a magical world view, thought, or more particularly focused thought, is considered a creative force, a world changing force, to a much greater extent than is commonly believed.
- often in a magical world view, spirits (of different types) can be called on for assistance in various matters, and they will come –
ancestors, saints, forms of divine beings, such as angels or bodhisattvas, or saviors
- sometimes in a magical world view, the whole world is thought to be alive, sentient

Magic, in it's most general sense, is changing the outside world by changing something in the inside world. This is often accomplished by ritual, or by prayer, meditation, the use of mantra, or a combination of these.

Sometimes it's asked, with so many mantras, where should a person begin?

I think of one analogy I heard years ago, that points to an answer, and that at the same time offers an explanation of why a mantra is more suitable for one person, and one not work for them. It goes like this:

Imagine a field or a plot of land, and beneath the surface of the earth, at different depths, are different kinds of seeds. The seeds that are closest to the surface are those that will give results first, or the most quickly. This is why gurus, or teachers with insight into a student's nature, their 'field', so to speak, are traditionally the ones who tell the student what mantra to practice.

The theory of karma - past experiences determining one's character and affinities - can be useful for some people, but it's not essential to accept as a prerequisite for practice. Just do some practice and you will see for yourself what mantra brings you what (if any) results.

The quantitative and qualitative aspects of mantra practice

When we make contact with a tradition through study, recitation, chanting or mantra, we can feel that we connect with a flow of energy to some extent. It may be a subtle feeling, or it can be something stronger, like a steady current. Sometimes it can be quite a forceful experience of energy, of a certain type of life that we are in touch with.

It can be like opening the sluice of a canal. We can feel we have contacted some source of energy, and we can feel it moving in us or through us.

(See 'Imagine an underwater system of channels...' - the short poem that follows this article)

However, if we only talk about a quantitative increase in energy (as if life-energy were just generic force, like water or electricity) that would not be saying enough. It wouldn't fully describe what we meet with and utilize when we connect with a tradition or make use of a mantra. We also need to speak of the qualitative aspect of spirit.

Ajaan Lee said this about the worth, or the value and power of certain states:

"Things that are genuine, or pure, even though they may be small, can give rise to

enormous results. Just as a piece of genuine paper money - a tiny strip of paper with the state seal - can be put to use in all sorts of ways. But if it's newsprint, even a bushel of it wouldn't be able to buy a thing.

In the same way, a pure mind, even if we can make it pure for only a little while, can give rise to results way in excess of its size."

And, in speaking about specific qualities, here's how one teacher named Mingyur Rinpoche replied when asked, "What does blessing mean?"

He said, "It is a particular type of power... various medicines have various types of strength, or power. Water has a power to wet things and clean things. Fire has a power to burn. When we put water in a field, it helps to grow flowers or crops. All phenomena have a particular power associated with them... Blessing comes as a particular type of power." (to accomplish a specific purpose).

For example, when one prays, "Grant me your blessing that uncontrived devotion may arise in me", What happens is, that one receives that power, the blessing, and one's defilements and obscurations are purified and dispelled. If one gives rise to devotion and faith and supplicates, then one has the blessing connected with arising of faith and devotion."

Many different practices

There are many different mantras, and many different practices that one can choose. Sometimes these are called 'yidam' or 'deity' practices.

It think it's important to consider clearly here what is meant by the word 'deity' in Buddhism. This is a difficult word for Westerners. We have a 2000 year monotheistic tradition that is in our Western soul. And any term that brings to mind our Western Tradition needs to be considered carefully.

All of the qualities represented by figures in Buddhism are within each of us. Every quality, of love, intelligence, purity, healing power - but usually we don't see ourselves this way.

If our self view were to fluctuate, even a little, we would find that simultaneously the way we view images representing enlightened qualities would change too.

If we see ourselves as ordinary beings, and we experience ourselves as

fundamentally without these qualities, then naturally if we think of Buddha's or Bodhisattva's qualities existing at all, they are felt to exist outside of us. (more on that in a moment, but first, a little more on this line of thought)

If there is a change in our self-view, or the way we experience our self-nature, then when we look at these images we can feel that "this quality is there - it is in Tradition and it is in me, as potential perhaps, but in the same way the fully developed flower-and-fruit giving tree is in the seed and the first shoots".

In addition to their being an external, historical aspect, like a reservoir of a particular energy that can be contacted, we can also feel that the image or the idea of what is called 'a deity' represents aspects of our own nature, fully developed.

Perhaps when we are there, when we are the fully expression of some enlightened quality, then we could look at the image, sometimes called 'deity', and, with understanding, say "That is me".

There may be one place where the Western idea of a deity and the way it is made use of in the Vajrayana overlap, and that is in it's external aspect. Names and forms of Buddhas and bodhisattvas can be called on, and they will respond. Not for everyone, and not always, but this is an inherited truth, this has been many peoples experience in many places throughout time. I've had this experience myself on many occasions or else I probably wouldn't be writing this.

Actually, many people have had the experience that mantra and prayer really do work in the ways they are praised - to heal, to harmonize, to clarify. But, again, as we say 'the proof is in the pudding'.

My feeling is that if others, or if even one other person could hear about these things, be inspired to practice, and gain some of this benefit, then my efforts here will have met with success. So I know I at least have to try to speak of these things.

To call on a holy Name, and to feel some response, this is precious, of inconceivable worth. But there is more intended by the practice of mantra and the forms passed down to us to be meditated upon.

We can receive their benefit as needed in our lives. And we are also encouraged to cultivate this understanding, that we all have all these qualities within us. We are encouraged to bring them out as much as we can, and to live and act in this world, in enlightened and enlightening ways, with compassion and wisdom.

Mahayana

What's called 'Mahayana' in Buddhist traditions refers to a re-orientation towards teachings, self, and others in the world.

All Buddhist lineages have teachings about love and compassion, but in Mahayana this aspect is placed right in the center. In this way of thought, the needs of all others, inclusively, and compassion for all is emphasized, and then every other practice, such as calm meditation, contemplation on mortality, karma or realizing selflessness, is seen in relation the suffering and confusion of living beings.

All these teachings then take on vast importance. When practiced, they can help us first to help ourselves, freeing, awakening, and increasing our ability to help, and they can directly help others.

When held, and maintained, all these teachings and practices can be seen as being not just for ourselves. And then their potential, to bring happiness and to remove suffering, can be perceived to be as it is - as something enormous, limitless. Seen this way, our appreciation of the value of these teachings can increase enormously in our mind.

These teachings and practices have the potential to benefit self and others. They can open the way to peace, health and every enjoyment, so their value is naturally very great.

What then to say about mantra? In this context, a Mahayanist (whether they think of themselves as Buddhist or not), someone who has bodhicitta heart, the intention to remove as much suffering as possible and to benefit others as much as possible, naturally will look in an unprejudiced way for whatever can help. Naturally, there will be no obstacle to that kind of determination to help.

What joy, then, when someone with these pure, good intentions, finds the study and practice of mantra. Even if this is not for everyone, due to karma and people's affinities, still, who would not be intrigued?

And in the true Buddhist spirit of free inquiry, the way is open, and the warmest invitation is given, to try the practice for oneself, to see if they work as described in many places (or possibly too in ways that are even better). Of course, they may not work at all, but for those with an affinity with any of these practices, the results

for oneself and for others can be very great.

Three meanings of the word 'Buddha'

Here are three possible meanings of the term 'Buddha', that can be seen as not contradictory, but complementary, and mutually fulfilling. The three are: The historical Buddha, the universal buddha (all Buddhas and bodhisattvas, enlightened and enlightening beings), and our own buddha nature.

Touching any of these, or furthering our understanding of any one, will add to our appreciation of all three aspects, not as separate, or competing, not as exclusive to each other, but as, each one, inclusive of the others.

The historical Buddha created (creates) all the many expressions - he is not separate from them. The expressions of this universal Buddha nature, as images, events, or teachings, are also not separate from the historical figure, the source, if you like (or any of these could be called the source).

And our buddha nature, knowing that enhances our appreciation of the historical Buddha, and the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. We have this within us.

Each person's way is unique and needs to be respected as such. Everyone's practice will be their own, unique path. Different practices will be needed along the way, and the whole range of teachings that people have used and benefited from should be known about, and, indeed, understood.

On Mantra and Initiation -

Often before beginning the practice of a mantra, a person will attend a ceremony called an initiation. This is helpful, to introduce a practice, and to further realization, but it is not essential to begin or to receive the benefits of a practice.

If you begin some practice, and get some positive result, then you may like to consider attending an initiation. This can strengthen your practice, and facilitate realization. An experienced Lama can share his or her energy, and connect us to a living lineage of practice, and this can be something really profound.

Some people gladly travel great distances to attend initiations, because of how important they feel these events to be. If you have any interest, and the chance to attend an initiation, by all means do take the opportunity.

You can check with your local Tibetan Buddhist centers for a schedule of events and initiations (also called ‘empowerments’). Usually there will be some teachings or commentary along with the ceremony that will explain what will take place and how to practice in detail.

Until that time, however, mantras and practices are available.

It's traditionally taught that what's called 'self-generation' - where one visualizes oneself as the deity - should only be done by those who have received the initiation of a particular deity, but that 'front generation' - where one visualizes the deity in space above and in front of oneself - can be done by anyone.

In front generation, we visualize (see with the mind’s eye) above us, the Buddha or bodhisattva whose practice we are doing, and

whose mantra we are reciting. It’s helpful when doing this recitation and visualization, to see pure light and nectar streaming from the image we hold (that is also made entirely of pure light). These represent, or carry the blessings of the Buddha.

We should also see ourselves, our own body, not in an ordinary way, not as flesh and bone, but as also being made entirely of light.

Many teachers advise, too, that when doing this visualization, we see ourselves in a pure land, and make the visualization as beautiful, peaceful, perfect, and pure as we can. This is helpful.

We can also do the practice without any elaborate or detailed visualization. We can just see light above us while reciting.

Or without any visualization at all, we can just recite the mantra.

People ask, ‘But isn’t this all just the imagination?’ And the answer is... yes, and... no. It may begin that way, but sometimes something else, something quite wonderful, can ‘kick in’, or enter into the practice. When done properly, by someone with an affinity for a particular practice, we can receive benefits far more than we could ever have merely ‘imagined’. We can tap into something larger than what we usually think of as ourselves, and receive fresh energy and inspiration. We can receive and awaken these different qualities that then can be made use of to benefit self and others.

May all beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering

(and may I be the cause of this)

(May I contribute to their freedom from suffering
as much as I can)

And,

May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness

(and may I be the cause of this)

(May I contribute to their happiness
as much as I can)

May everyone receive, understand and practice well the teachings that will benefit them the most, freeing their minds from suffering and confusion, and may all arrive at peace, fulfillment and joy in this very life.

Imagine an underwater system of channels
one channel opens
and the stream of cool, pure water can be felt moving through
felt all the way back to its source
Contacting a spiritual tradition can be this way
the clean, clear life moving through
felt in this very place, and known to its origin
Teachers, practitioners, deities, protector spirits
virtues faithfully maintained
and given forward through lives
We are welcomed by this, our family
They are eager to assist the awakening life
the heart becomes very quiet watching this work
this far reaching, unceasing compassion
They speak behind their words
move behind the curtains of form
in silence, shaping
All of this is given to you, it is immanent
the life within the life

The relationship between compassion and mantra

In Buddhism, The Tantras, and the practice of mantra comes from the Mahayana Tradition. Their reason for existing is to help us and to help us to help others. It's taught that, in as much as we can align ourselves with the current of the compassionate aims of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, to that extent can we connect with them and receive their blessing. And sometimes I do believe this.

Of course, Buddhas aim to help all equally, and I think that, miraculously, and with great compassion and ability, they meet us wherever we are in life. This is also my experience.

If we call on them just able to think of ourselves, no doubt, we can receive benefits, when our thinking includes others we are connected to, we can receive even more. We can become a bit more like the Buddhas, both in our generosity, and in what we give as well.

It is in practicing with a compassionate mind that knows our relation to others that prayers and mantras reveal their power and significance. If we are made to care for each other, for as long as we are on this earth, then surely our prayer and activities are in the nature of existing for self-others-and- this whole world.

Things that can be done with mantra

heal
strengthen
relieve
purify
bring light
protect
clarify
liberate from samsara
facilitate the liberation from samsara
comfort the lonely
bring about the manifestation of the good

rescue the crazy, the out of balance
hold back the endangered
give riches to the poor
relieve depression
cure depression
give direction
strengthen realization
eliminate maras
pacify, remove the influence of, transform maras
increase realizations of the graduated path,
and all realizations

The Resonance of the Saints

Even though a holy man or woman may have laid down their earthly form, their influence remains as a blessing to all who know them. This is hard or impossible to believe for the average materialist, and even in some circles where spiritual or religious matters are discussed, many have trouble accepting this idea.

In modern life, our senses are turned outwards. We may have grown numb and jaded, and disillusioned with false promises. We seldom register the slight changes that happen as a result of a written word, or an image; a voice, a melody, a color, or movement in the world. Still, if we were to train our attention to pick up on the usually small changes, they may lead us to discover marvelous things about our being here, and our connections to one another.

Usually when we think of some miracle happening, we assume it would be a gigantic change, something so out of the ordinary that it startles us awake into a new level of awareness. We imagine that something like a levitation, or an object materializing, or some illness suddenly vanishing without a trace would convince us we live in a miraculous world, however, it doesn't usually happen that way. There are great and small miracles happening, and we remain unconvinced.

I try to remember a line I thought of a few years back: 'The problem with a miracle on Monday is that by Tuesday we've forgotten about it.' Coarse and jaded we are, oh yes indeed.

The problem is that those dramatic moments so easily fade into memory, and disbelief. It would seem we would need to witness ever new and more impressive miracles to keep our faith going, and even then, I doubt we'd believe.

There is a tradition established in the time of the Buddha of not displaying any powers that were developed through concentration, such as clairvoyance. The reason was plain. The Buddha wanted to teach people the way to freedom. We can only imagine how crowds would gather wanting to see some unusual event, and if some display was made, that's what they would remember. They would go home having learned nothing.

When we speak of a holy man or woman, or a divine being, what we are referring to is someone who has reached the truth to an exceptional degree. Saints of any tradition can be known by their spontaneously ethical and deeply loving nature. They often have an elevating quality to them as well - we may feel blissful for

hours or even days after meeting one. Witness the response many people have had to the Dalai Lama, or to Lama Yeshe, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, or to Amma.

That a holy person's influence remains after their body returns to the elements brings another level to it altogether, however. It means that, wherever we are, if we have faith and some connection to that teacher, or seer, or prophet, we can be enriched, uplifted, healed, and guided by them.

This is not unheard of in the Indian Tradition. They realize that a saint transcends the limitations of his or her form even while they are alive, and that their blessings remain ever fresh and vital.

Often the reason people go on pilgrimage is to connect with the energy of a saint or divinity. Although a their presence is not limited to any one place, owing to the conditions of our senses, for some people it is easier to connect with that energy on an etheric level in a place where a saint has physically been.

People's respect and devotion to a holy person, or a teacher or divinity can also help us to connect with them. Devotees can consecrate a place or an object. They can literally help to imbue it with a particular spiritual power. More than once, I have seen and experienced how people's devotion can open a channel between the worlds, so to speak, between these different levels of being.

(For those who are interested, I've written down a few stories where I describe this happening and put them in my book *A Belief in the Miraculous*.)

Even just hearing someone speak of their teacher with great faith and devotion can open up access for us, for a time, and we can see and feel and receive something of what they are so moved and inspired by.

I have thought that we need to develop our language to talk about spiritual things, as ordinary words and concepts do not reach into the mystery, as Rumi says. They often have a way of excluding from our vision and senses those deeper sources of nourishment, strength and guidance.

When we speak of the resonance of the saints, it is their being that continues, and that communicates through their works, and through their students and devotees. At any time, we can pick up on the energy of a healer, a humble, wise scholar, a lesser or more well known protector and benefactor, or a great world teacher. Knowing this for ourselves comes as a supreme gift.

We are encouraged to avail ourselves as much as needed of the energy of the saints and the divine life, for our own sake, and for the sake of our family, community and world. The problem is only that we are distracted, that our senses are so covered over, and that we so strongly disbelieve anything out of the ordinary. But even some slight opening on our part, some remembrance, and all our faith can be vindicated, all of our faith-lessness destroyed. After connecting to a saint, our old habitual sense of the world begins to fade. Our lives are blessed, and they become that much more of a gift to others.

The Nature of An Awakened Person

The *very nature* of an awakened person is to benefit others. His or her tangible qualities are like the sun, they are bright, and joyful, and endlessly beneficial to others. They are effortless, spontaneous, impartial, enduring, bringing harmony, joy and peace, healing, strength and encouragement.

I think of Thich Nhat Hanh, the 16th Karmapa, Lama Yeshe, Bokar Rinpoche, Tsultrik Rinpoche, Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro, Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche, and Saints of other traditions, as having wisdom, as being free, and as effortlessly manifesting such virtues as these.

By their very nature, seeing them, looking at their photograph, or thinking of them immediately brings light to the mind, and can re-establish health and harmony in a person. They are such powerful objects of refuge, faith and devotion for this reason. They bring peace and joy, and help us to awaken.

The perfectly divine, original nature that is known by and then is revealed in a Noble person communicates with words, by look, gesture, touch, and by its presence.

This nature is what relieves suffering and brings happiness, everywhere and at all times. This light removes the darkness from the minds of ourselves and others, and destroys wrong views. It establishes people in right views about themselves, and others, and this world.

With buddhahood, or someone with any degree of realization, it's not that one achieves something and then just sits there peacefully, doing nothing. In fact, they are *most* active, for that is their very nature. In a saintly person, or in a Buddha or a perfectly awakened one, it can be most clearly seen how being *is* doing.

Even with an ordinary person, with ordinary states of mind, being is doing- their qualities are being manifested in what they think, say and do. We don't usually notice this however, since its not so pronounced. With a saintly person, an arahat or bodhisattva, it is far more tangible.

Buddhahood, the highest achievement of the contemplative life, the pinnacle, that which is most worthy of reverence, and the well-justified aim for all who would bring the greatest benefit to the world, is also the clearest expression of the divine life working in the world.

This Buddhahood is *synonymous* with Buddha-Activity: It is spontaneous, impartial, intelligent, creative, adaptive, compassionate, and joyful, all without any effort at all. An awakened person is never separated from and are never unaware of their boundless, peaceful and free nature, therefore they can most effectively help others, while maintaining their view, and access to rich inner resources.

Prayer as Buddha Activity

Prayer is Buddha Activity - the awakened heart responding to the needs of the world. To think of it this way is different from the usual idea about prayer, but doing so helps us to understand both the act of prayer, and what is meant by a Buddha or one who is Awake.

The mere gesture of placing the palms together may or may not be one of prayer. It all depends on what is going on inside a person. Someone can be thinking of anything at all. When they are thinking of and appealing to the divine, in the unique way that only they can know, then the outward gesture of prayer, in the traditional sense, matches what is going on inside.

Prayer has been described sometimes as a conversation, and at other times as praise, or as a deep listening for 'the still, small voice'. It can be an upwelling, an exuberance at other times, and it can be an attending to what we know, buried deep within us, as a source of solace, guidance and encouragement.

Prayer has been described as changing *us*, and not the nature of the one prayed to. We become more receptive, more malleable, more attuned to truth and love. This is true whether our prayer is in the Christian context, to God, or Jesus, or to the Saints of that tradition, or in a Buddhist framework, to the divine as found there.

Rumi said:

Work on your stony qualities and become resplendent like the ruby

Prayer also reaches out, in every tradition, it moves through us, and into the world. This is true whether we are in our cell, meditating on the world as it is, and on the needs of our loved ones, strangers, friends, co-workers and adversaries of the moment, or whether we are out and about in our daily lives, speaking, and working.

I remember a book of Christian prayer I came across in India in the 90's with the title 'Prayer in Action'. Its theme was that there are forms of prayer that are active, and that are without words at times, doing one's share of the will of the Father, building the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

This broadens the definition of prayer to divine activity, or to the activity of the divine in us and through us.

*Dig a well in the earth of this body,
or even before the well is dug
let God draw the water up.*

There is an effort to be made, then effortless-ness, something greater than our usual idea of ourselves becoming active.

There are the same ideas in Buddhism, and knowing about them helps clarify the nature of an awakened person, in any tradition.

There is an effort to be made, and then, when there is realization, or an awakening, the very nature of such a person is active. Whether they show peace and stability - I'm thinking of Thich Nhat Hanh and Ajaan Chah, sitting with such great stability and dignity- or whether they demonstrate the joy of the Way and the realized life, and thereby energize and encourage us, as with Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche, and some Zen masters, their being *is* their doing. What they are, and what they have realized inside communicates and inspires, it edifies and uplifts the mind and the heart.

It is like the proverbial 'stream clearing jewel', cleaning the muck from our thought and perceptions, revealing the beauty and preciousness of this life and the world.

This buddha nature - this original nature- also acts by organizing, by teaching, by writing and speaking, by giving food and clothing, and medicine and care, every needful thing. It heals. It is grounded in this present reality, and is far seeing.

There is so much to be done in this world as it is now, but I have faith that we can awaken to the truth of our being here, and it is with this wisdom and compassion, this divine life, that we will continue creating a world based on truth, and love.

Touch the Present, Heal the Past, Create the Future

“You might think that the present moment is not the past, is not the future—but as you continue to look deeply into the present moment, you see that the present moment contains the past, and contains the future. And touching the present moment, you're touching the past, you're touching the future. And you can even heal the past, and create the future, while you dwell firmly in the present moment.”
- Thich Nhat Hanh

Whether or not we think about it, the past is a part of who we are now. This is true whether we are speaking about our personal life, or the life and history of our people, or our country. The sum total of our past is what brought us to where we are today. We may not want to think of the past, or acknowledge it, but it is here, and it influences how we see the world, and how we treat each other.

In a sense, the past is fixed. We can't change what has happened. What is not fixed however is how we now understand and choose to carry the past going forward. In other words, the present is not fixed. We have choices, and so the future is not yet determined.

Some people either deny what has happened to themselves or in this country, or they give it scant attention. But this is simple math: if we want to come to terms with something significant in our own life or in our history, we have to give it the time it deserves to understand it, to reconcile ourselves to it, and to remedy and heal its effects going forward. If we don't give these things enough time and attention, choosing instead to move on in a facile way, at best we'll get a small result in terms of health and insight, in the times ahead.

Where is this past to be found? It is found in our very bodies. If we learn to steady the mind, focus in, and look, we can see that so many causes have come together for us to be here as we are today: magnificent causes, tragic causes, uncountable blessings, unspeakable sadness. Because we all have this natural wish for our own happiness, and that of our children, friends and neighbors, we need to look at what will secure the peace and well being that we seek. Our past, individually, as a people, and as a country needs to be looked into to see what got us here, and so that we can secure the best outcome, for ourselves and loved ones.

Sometimes we may avoid looking at the painful parts of our history because we feel we can't do anything about them. We may feel we are not up to the task of healing it. We think that to look would just be reopening old wounds, and we

recognize that sometimes the best thing we can do is to leave things in the past. But there is a whole category of events that don't heal completely by leaving them alone, and *those* we need to understand more deeply. Moreover, *we need to recognize the capacity we all have to heal the past, in the present moment.*

Thich Nhat Hanh said something interesting a number of years ago when talking about the three times. He said, *Touch the present, heal the past.* Clearly, not all the ways of accessing our history has a healing effect, so what did he mean by this? *I think he was talking about touching the past with love, and with the intention to care fully for this body, and for the wounds we have carried so long in our heart, as our heritage.* If we are not to perpetuate the injury and anguish of what's come before, we need to bring our very best resources to bear on this body.

All the past suffering that has come down to us, and that has shaped us and influenced who we are now can be met with mindfulness, and compassion, leading to insight and healing. We don't need to be prisoners of the past. If we train ourselves, we can become free individuals, and pass that on as our gift to our friends, family and future generations.

Past, Present, and Future; Politics taken to the level of Spirit

We may think that we can leave some things in the past, socially or personally and that they will self-correct, or leave us in peace. There are some experiences that are like that, no doubt, but the really formative events don't go anywhere, even when the surface changes. They can be like roots pushing upwards beneath what is seen in our lives or in our culture, waiting for a chance to manifest. Not only does the past live on in us in some way, it can recur, and even take more terrible forms. It also conditions how we experience our lives now, acting as a filter, and shaping our values and responses to what we know. Not only is our own history included in this, the history of our family and ancestors is here with us as well.

Both our personal story and our history are an inheritance we carry, and both can be held and understood and healed in us, if we make this a conscious choice. We do need to step back from repeated injuries, and stop them from happening, and that is an important first step, but by itself this doesn't go far enough.

In the enlightenment story of the Buddha, during the first watch of the night, it's said that he remembered his past. Certainly it was a past that experienced many kinds of suffering and misunderstanding, but that then became the foundation for his wisdom.

Where do we find forgiveness, for ourselves for our own wrong actions, and for others, individuals and groups? I've noticed that for me, whenever forgiveness happens, there are causes behind it, principally those of understanding that it's confusion that leads people to harmful actions, and my own wish for peace. To be more precise, without an insight into *my own* ignorance and suffering, it's likely that I'll put myself down, and that I'll blame others and lash out at them. Being close to and understanding our own evolution out of bewilderment and misery opens the way to having compassion for others, for forgiveness, and healing, in ourselves and our world, going forward. This takes a lot of courage, and a great deal of faith in our potential to heal, and to become whole.

In the Buddha's teaching on loving kindness, he said that we should extend our care to those *already born, and yet to be born*. This is in complete accord with the First People's view that we should take care of each other and this earth in a way that reaches to the seventh generation. How to do this? How to live now? We must think deeply about these things, especially now when so much seems to threaten our survival.

*In this very moment, in this very body
we practice looking deeply,
embracing our loved ones, and this earth
with all our care*

We have inherited not only the errors and harms of the past, but also our ancestors' great wisdom, courage, and compassion. Look within - this is also what we carry with us now. These holy gifts have been passed down to us through the generations, to be drawn from especially in times like these. So many times when we want to change our culture we are facing outwards, racing all over, when we should be looking within at what we carry, and our potential. If as individuals we take the healing of our world in ourselves as far as we can go, this is the best thing we can do. We have to take this healing to the level of the spirit, both for our own sake, and for all of our loved ones.

The following is a poem I wrote about healing ourselves and our world, as we have received it, right here in this very body and mind:

All the ancient suffering,
of exclusion, and exile,
of discrimination, and persecution

All the wounded memory, held tight,
and fears -
oh, for there to be ease!

If this sorrow is not to continue
for generations to come,
what is sought,
the vision carried,
needs to be known *now*,
as a balm reaching back
all the way to the first injury,
and forward,
flourishing through the ages

We may have an idea of ourselves as separate from each other, from our natural environment, and even from our past and future generations. This deeply held idea keeps us from knowing ourselves and each other as we truly are. Once we've moved beyond identifying with an ego-idea, understood it as a mere convention and seen through it, the world opens up. Because we are connected in profound ways with our world and with each other in every moment, communication is possible.

Once you have demolished the world which is built on the foundation of ignorance, then wisdom itself moves to build a world based on the foundation of wisdom. -
from an oral teaching by Tara Tulku, as told to Robert Thurman

In the Avatamsaka Sutra, a Buddhist teaching from the first century A.D., there is an image called the Jeweled Net of Indra that describes how we exist in the world, and how the world exists in us. It is imagined as a net as vast as the universe, and on every intersection of the net is a jewel. All the jewels are reflected in each one jewel, and each one is reflected in all the others. We exist in this world right now, and the totality of this world exists in us.

We are not closed systems. Because in this very moment our bodies and minds are permeable, porous, we can breathe, receive oxygen, eat and digest food, and listen to and share knowledge and information with each other through time and space. Communication is possible. How then should we live? How can we best care for ourselves and each other? One of the secrets of this mind of ours is that it is not

only an organ of perception, it is also an instrument of transmission. We can receive and transmit blessings and healing energy with our mind. We can heal ourselves, and help to heal our loved ones and our world.

Once we know our connection in this very moment to our world, to one another, to past and future generations, and our own potential, it changes how we view personal and collective problems. Let us then bring the very best qualities of mind to these challenges we have now, and those to come, and heal it all, down to the very roots. We can do this with great love and compassion, with meditation, and prayer, with mantra, ritual, and good works, and in all our relationships.

The following prayers are based on teachings by Thich Nhat Hanh

*I carry the experience and wisdom of my ancestors,
and I ask them for their support, protection and strength...*

and

*I see my teachers and spiritual ancestors in me
and I open myself to their inspiring, positive energy...
I vow to practice to transform the suffering in myself and in all others,
and to transmit their love and wisdom to future generations...*

On Dedication Prayer

Dedication makes a bridge from our own practice to connect with people. The more we dedicate the merit of some positive activity, in our hearts and minds, the more we are sharing whatever positive creative energy we have produced by our practice with others. As with all acts of sincere generosity, this increases its value for us all even more, and makes it shine even more brightly within us.

On another level, since there is no separation between us in reality, this kind of orientation is also an affirmation. It says, in effect, ‘this is who we are’. We are connected. It’s right to always be as generous as we can, and our true nature *is* this active love and compassion.

If we are cultivating love and compassion, we are naturally producing what could be called ‘continual dedication’. This quality of mind is naturally connected to others. This is the one quality of mind that most facilitates re-integration with others after meditation or retreat.

The final dedication prayers we make at the conclusion of any particular practice also affirm to our own mind this knowledge we have, that the practice we are doing has the power to work for us as we intend. It’s a statement we make to ourselves of confidence in its effectiveness.

When we do the practice of dedication, it’s taught that we shouldn’t think that our merit – our positive creative energy producing happiness – is divided up between all those we share it with, but rather that every being we are dedicating to receives the full measure of our what we share. We dedicate, or give over, in our mind, in our heart, all our positive energy, good fortune, health, peace, learning and enjoyments, and the causes of these. May all beings benefit.

It’s important to dedicate the positive energy we create not only to friends, family, those we feel we owe something, and to ‘neutral’ people, but also to those who give us problems, the people who we sometimes perceive as antagonistic towards us. This gives our practice an indestructible quality,

and makes it truly extensive, without limitation and without obstruction. No one can keep us from wishing them well, regardless of their attitude toward us. This is

the freedom of the mind that we have as human beings, and such wishes are sure to bear fruit in time.

In ‘The Heart of Compassion: The Thirty-seven Verses on the Practice of a Bodhisttva’, concerning the practice of dedication, Dilgo Khyentse says, ‘Dedicate all the merit and positive actions you have done or will do throughout the past, present and future so that all beings, especially your enemies, may achieve enlightenment. Try to dedicate the merit in the same way that the great bodhisattvas do.

‘Not a single prayer vanishes. Dedicating the merit of every positive action you do with a pure mind will continuously bear positive fruit until you attain enlightenment.

‘The attitude of a bodhisattva must be extremely vast, constantly keeping in mind the infinity of beings and the wish to establish them all in buddhahood. If your mind is vast, the power of your prayers is unlimited too. If your mind is narrow and rigid, your accumulation of merit and the purification of your obscurations will also be very limited.

‘Do not let yourself be discouraged by such thoughts as that it is not worth dedicating what you see as your miserable accumulation of merit because it could hardly benefit anyone; or by the idea that for you helping others is just talk since you will never really be able to benefit them. If you keep your mind open and vast, the effectiveness of your bodhicitta (the naturally enlightened aspect of the mind) will increase, and so too will the benefit and merit of all your words and deeds.

‘In your daily life and practice you must keep developing the excellent mind of enlightenment.’

Seen in one way, in the beginning we set our motivation. Then we do a particular practice, whatever works for us, and are attentive to just this. Then, at the conclusion, being as generous as we naturally know how to, we joyfully dedicate or give over whatever positive energy we have created through our practice to accomplishing our intention.

Sometimes dedication is referred to as ‘sealing’ our meditation. In this sense it does two related things: First, it keeps whatever positive energy we have produced from becoming, even unconsciously, a cause of the negative sort of separative pride, and second it concludes and integrates the formal practice on a most positive note – that of kind regard and abundant good wishes towards others.

One last note on the subject of dedication: It’s taught that the best way to dedicate merit, if we can, is with the right view, that is, without clinging to oneself, the action or the recipient of an action as having intrinsic reality, as it appears to our mind. This is called ‘sealing the dedication of merit with wisdom’, or emptiness. We can at least have this as an aim.

In The Thirty-seven Verses, the verse that refers to this says:

Dedicating to enlightenment

Through wisdom purified of the three concepts
all merit achieved by such endeavor,
to remove the suffering of numberless beings, is the practice
of a bodhisattva

This may not be easy to accomplish, and yet there is always much we can do. In the Traditional teachings on dedication, there are many ways to engage this wonderful practice.

As expressed by Dilgo Khyentse: ‘To dedicate merit in the best possible way – a way entirely free from the three concepts of a subject, an object, and an action – is possible only for someone who has fully realized emptiness. How then should we ordinary beings dedicate the merit, (as yet) incapable as we are of such perfect dedication? We can do it by following in the footsteps of those who have that realization.

‘The bodhisattva Samantabhadra mastered the ocean-like infinitude of a bodhisattva’s aspirations, while Manjushri and Avalokiteshvara mastered the oceanlike infinitude of a bodhisattva’s activity to benefit beings. When you dedicate merit, do it with the idea of emulating the way these great bodhisattvas dedicated merit.’

Feel free to use any or all of the following prayers if you like, substitute prayers or verses of your own choosing, or write your own prayers.

May all beings benefit.

Shantideva's Dedication of Merit
(excerpt)

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

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

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

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

May the poor find wealth,
Those weak with sorrow find joy.
May the forlorn find hope,
Constant happiness and prosperity.

May there be timely rains
And bountiful harvests.
May all medicines be effective
And wholesome prayers bear fruit.

May all who are sick and ill
Quickly be freed from their ailments.

Whatever diseases there are in the world,
May they never occur again.

May the frightened cease to be afraid
And those bound be freed.
May the powerless find power
And may people think of benefiting each other.

For as long as space endures,
And for as long as living beings remain,
Until then, may I too abide,
To dispel the misery of the world.

Dedication prayers, by Jason Espada, with Traditional prayers

By the merit of this practice,
and by the merit of any other good I have done,

together with all the blessings and virtue
of all the ten-directions three times
Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Saints and Sages,
Yidams, Saviors, Great World Teachers,
Realized Beings, Lamas,
Jewel-like Monks and Nuns,
Yogis and Yoginis, Arhats and Ajaans,
Mahasiddhas, Togden and Togdenmas,
Kadampa Geshees, Contemplatives of all Traditions,
and all excellent practitioners,
by all these limitless skies of merit,

together with all the virtue and pure good wishes of family, friends,
and noble, kind hearted people everywhere,

along with all the great, wonderful, positive energy of the natural world,

and the blessings of celestial beings,
angels and ancestors, guardians and protectors,

by the merit and positive energy of *all* the good that exists,
by all the virtue of the Ultimate Nature,
Universal Goodness,
Universal Love and Compassion,

by all this merit,

May the benefit of beings everywhere effortlessly arise:

May all beings benefit.

May all beings everywhere have happiness,
and all of the fully actualized causes of true health and happiness.

May this bring healing wherever it is needed

By the virtue of this practice, by *all* this merit,
and by our own awakened insight,
may we all be *completely* free from all illness, spirit harm,
and from all of the afflictive emotions forever

May we all be *completely* free from all samsaric states forever
May we all know freedom
May all beings completely realize the Dharmakaya, and,
May this be the medicine that frees everyone from suffering

(a prayer by the Noble Spiritual Friend Lama Zopa Rinpoche)

By this merit, may all those who are unhappy in any way,
(confused, angry, anxious, afraid, attached,
sad or depressed, with distorted views),
instantly
be completely freed from those states.
May they be comforted,
and may they have perfect peace,
wisdom, strength and lasting joy

By all merit and positive spiritual energy,
may all those who are suffering from pain or illness
immediately be totally freed from that pain,
may those who have been in an accident completely recover,
may they immediately be completely healed,
and may they all be firmly established in true and lasting health and happiness
well being and strength,
comfort and ease

May all beings be safe
May they be healthy
May they be happy, and,
May they know they are loved

By all this merit,
may all those who want to go on retreat

have the opportunity to do so without delay;
 may they all have the resources they need,
 may they find all suitable conditions,
 and, without obstacles,
 may their retreat go exceedingly well
 may they have all excellent realizations

By *all* this virtue,
 May health increase everywhere
 May ethics, and meditation and wisdom increase in me and in the world
 May pure loving kindness and compassion increase, and
 May peace and harmony increase everywhere

By all this merit,
 may all those who work to heal receive all they need to work most effectively in
 this world
 May their healing qualities increase limitlessly,
 and may they remain without pride

By all this merit,
 may all monasteries,
 monks, and nuns, and lay practitioners,
 Dharma Centers, hospitals, clinics,
 schools and social service centers
 have everything they need to serve beings most effectively

May monastics and the laity everywhere all keep completely pure ethics,
 develop the supreme good heart, and wisdom,
 and may all their good works effectively flourish forever

By all this merit,
 may all beings have all they need in their lives
 May those who need a job find a good job,
 and may they prosper abundantly
 May those who need a place to live find a good place to live
 May those who need food and drink find good food and drink
 May those who need a friend find a friend

By all this virtue,
 May we all have everything we need to be truly happy

By all this merit,
May everything we see, hear, think about and dream be auspicious

May all beings have happiness
and the causes of happiness...
May all beings be free of suffering and the causes of suffering...
I rejoice in all that is beautiful and right in the world,
in all virtue and positive action,
and in all success, happiness and good fortune...
and abide in stable, impartial love

By all this merit, may all the pure positive wishes we have for each other
be completely fulfilled,
instantly, and effortlessly,
just as in a Pure Land

(the following two prayers I have heard and admired from Lama Zopa Rinpoche)

By all this virtue

May those I hear about that are sick immediately be healed

May all those who have come to my attention
who have any illness,
or who are unhappy, or in need in any way
be blessed
May they be healed
May they all benefit
May they all have happiness
and all the completely actualized causes of health and happiness

and

May those I have heard about who have passed away be reborn in a Pure Land,
without taking birth any place else

May their families be comforted
May they all know blessed peace

By all this merit,
 May those I hear about who are experiencing difficulties
 be free from those difficulties,
 and may all fortunate circumstances come to them right away

May the spiritual energy that arises
 from my devotion to the Enlightened Ones,
 be dedicated to dispelling the misery of living beings without exception

May all beings be safe
 May they be healthy
 May they be happy
 May they know they are loved

May the supreme jewel, bodhicitta
 arise where it has not yet arisen
 Where it has arisen, may it not diminish
 May it ever grow and flourish

By this merit,
 and by the merit of any other good I have done,

together with all the blessings and virtue
 of all the ten-directions three times
 Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Saints and Sages,
 Yidams, Saviors, Great World Teachers,
 Realized Beings, Lamas,
 Jewel-like Monks and Nuns,
 Yogis and Yoginis, Arhats and Ajaans,
 Mahasiddhas, Togden and Togdenmas,
 Kadampa Geshees, Contemplatives of all Traditions,
 and all excellent practitioners,
 by all these limitless skies of merit,

together with all the virtue and pure good wishes of family, friends,
 and noble, kind hearted people everywhere,

along with all the great, wonderful, positive energy of the natural world,
 and the blessings of celestial beings,

angels and ancestors, guardians and protectors,

by the merit and positive energy of *all* the good that exists,
by all the virtue of the Ultimate Nature,
Universal Goodness,
Universal Love and Compassion,

by all this merit,
and by our own awakened insight,

May warfare cease,
may all injury be healed,
and all danger pacified

May we all produce the conditions
for countless generations, starting now,
to experience genuine peace

May all poverty and hunger be alleviated
May this earth be protected,
honored and cared for

and may we all cherish one another
and this world we live in

May we all be supremely respectful, considerate,
kind, and gentle to ourselves
and to each other

May our intentions equally penetrate
every being and place
with the true merit of Buddha's Way.

without grasping or clinging to anything *at all*,
may it be this way

May all beings be safe
May they be healthy
May they be happy
May they know they are loved

By all this merit,
 may all those to whom I am connected
 by good or bad karma,
 have every happiness
 May they all know freedom,
 and may they be free of all suffering
 May they receive all joys, and all good fortune,
 and may they and their loved ones,
 family, friends, and co-workers
 all have good health, wisdom,
 long life,
 well being, and strength,
 comfort and ease

By this merit,
 may family members and friends who are estranged
 be reconciled,
 and may there always be peace between them, from now on

May all the prayers of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas
 be completely realized now
 and may all of my prayers succeed immediately

By this virtue,
 May those who are in need in any way whatsoever
 receive every benefit
 May all have happiness
 and all the actualized complete causes of health and happiness

{at this point, a review of the names and circumstances of those particular
 individuals that you wish to pray for can be inserted here}

By all this virtue,
 May those who are in need in any way whatsoever
 receive every benefit
 May all have happiness
 and all the fully actualized complete causes of health and happiness

By all this merit,

and by following the example of my
 Guides of Great Virtue,
 may I not withhold any gift whatsoever
 from any being in any place,
 wishing them all a great abundance of joys!

By all the limitless good that exists,
 may all the needs of all living beings everywhere be completely fulfilled

By all this merit, for every one of us,
 when this life is over,
 may we each be born immediately in a Pure Land,
 and in all our lives
 May we never be separate from qualified teachers,
 and from conducive environments, with all the supportive conditions for
 continuing our practice of the Dharma

May I always go without hesitation
 wherever I can bring the greatest benefit to others,

By all this virtue
 May I attain the complete realization of all practice
 that I may bring all others without a single exception to that same state

May we all individually attain the complete realization of our spiritual practice,
 freedom, genuine, stable happiness,
 health and peace, and all good things,
 wisdom, compassion, and ability

By all this merit,
 May all holy teachers live long, and guide us until samsara ends.
 And may there be peace and joy in all the world.