

Transforming Our Daily Activities

A Practical Guide To Practising Buddhism In Daily Life



Ven Thubten Chodron

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Please pass this book around should you feel that you do not need it anymore. As the Buddha taught, the gift of Truth excels all other gifts! May all have the chance to know the Dharma.

It is very, very rare for one to have a precious human life and still be able to encounter the Buddha-Dharma, therefore please handle this book with utmost respect and care.



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Dear Reader,

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Preface

If you have been touched and inspired by the Buddha's teachings to lead a more fulfilling life, here is a book that you may find useful in your daily practices and help anchor you to walk the path of the dharma even more firmly.

The teachings and methods listed in this book are taught by Venerable Thubten Chodron and Venerable Zopa Rinpoche. They aim to help practising Buddhists everywhere transform their daily activities into acts of compassion and loving-kindness.

They have shown us through their teachings that spiritual practice need not be separated from daily

living. As long as one is mindfully aware each and every moment, as long as one keeps the Buddha's teachings and the Triple Gem close to one's heart and mind, one is already living and breathing the Dharma every single moment even while one is at work, fetching the children, driving or doing grocery shopping!

And if you're somebody who loves to complain or cannot get a day by without talking about the faults of others, Venerable Thubten Chodron has some very good antidotes for you listed on chapter 2 and 3 to help transform your mindset into a more positive one.

May all sentient beings be well and happy.
May all progress well on the path of the Dharma!

Yours in the Dharma,
Sister Esther Thien
Executive Editor
Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery
Awaken Publishing and Design
Dharma Propagation Division

*-Mindfulness is the Method, Compassion is the Expression, and
Wisdom is the Essence-*

Chapter I:
Chocolate Frosting and
Garbage



The Practice of Dharma
Is To Change Your Attitude Towards Life and
Give Up Attachment To Worldly Concerns.

We hear the great masters say: “Practising Buddhism is good. It will bring you happiness in this and future lives,” and we think, “Umm... This sounds interesting.” But when we try to do it, sometimes we get confused. There are so many kinds of practice to do. “Should I prostrate? Should I make offerings? Maybe meditation is better? But chanting is easier, perhaps I should do that instead.” We also compare our practice to that of others. “My friend just made 100,000 prostrations in one month. But my knees hurt and I can’t do any!” we think with jealousy. Sometimes, doubt arises in our mind and we wonder, “Other religions teach about morality, love and compassion. Why should I limit myself to Buddhism?” We go around in circles, and in the process, lose sight of the real meaning of what we are trying to do.

To resolve this, we need to understand what it means when we say: “I follow the Buddha’s teachings”. Let’s look beyond clinging to the words “I’m a Buddhist”. Let’s look beyond the external appearance of being a religious person. What is it that we want from our lives? Isn’t finding some kind of lasting happiness and helping others the essence of what most human beings seek?

One does not have to call him/herself a Buddhist in order to practise the Dharma and receive benefit from it. Interestingly, in Tibetan, you can't find the word, *Buddhism*. This is noteworthy, for sometimes we get so caught up in the names of religions that we forget their meaning, and busy ourselves defending our religion and criticising those of others. This is a useless venture. In fact the term, *Dharma* includes any teaching that, if practised correctly, leads people to temporal or ultimate happiness. It doesn't exclude teachings given by other religious leaders, provided that these teachings lead us to the attainment of temporal or ultimate happiness.

Examples are readily available: moral discipline such as abandoning killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct and intoxicants is taught in many other religions, as is love and compassion for others. This is the Dharma, and it is beneficial for us to practise such advice, whether we call ourselves Buddhist or Hindu or Christian or whatever. This is not to say that all religions are the same in every respect, for they aren't. However, everyone, no matter which religion we identify with, should practise the parts in each of them that lead us to temporal and ultimate happiness.

It is extremely important not to get bogged down in words. Sometimes people ask me: “Are you Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Hindu or Muslim? Are you Mahayana or Theravada? Do you follow Tibetan Buddhism or Chinese Buddhism? Are you Gelu, Kargyu, Sakya or Nyingma?” To this complexity of concepts, I reply: “I am a human being searching for a path to discover truth and happiness and to make my life beneficial for others.” That’s the beginning and end of it. It so happens that I have found a path that suits my inclination and disposition in such and such a religion, and such and such a tradition. However, there is no use in clinging onto the terms, “I am a Buddhist of the Tibetan variety and practise the Gelu tradition.” We already have made enough simple words into concrete concepts. Isn’t this grasping at fixed and limited categories what we are trying to eliminate from our minds? If we cling to such labels in a close-minded way, then we give ourselves no choice but to quarrel with and criticise others who happen to have different labels. There are already enough problems in the world, what is the use of creating more by having bigoted religious views and conceitedly defaming others?

A Kind Heart

A kind heart is one of the principal things we are trying to develop. If we run around childishly telling others: “I’m this religion, and you’re that religion. But, mine is better,” it is like turning chocolate frosting into garbage: what was delicious becomes useless. Instead, we would be much wiser to look inside ourselves and apply the antidotes to intolerance, pride and attachment. The true criterion of whether we are a religious or spiritual person is whether we have a kind heart towards others and a wise approach to life. These qualities are internal and cannot be seen with our eyes. They are gained by honestly looking at our own thoughts, words and actions, discriminating which ones to encourage and which ones to abandon, and then engaging in the practices to develop compassion and wisdom in order to transform ourselves.

While we are trying to practise the Dharma, let’s not get entrenched in superficial appearances. There is a story of one Tibetan man who wanted to practise the Dharma, so he spent days circumambulating holy relic monuments. Soon his teacher came by and said:

“What you’re doing is very nice, but wouldn’t it be better to practise the Dharma?” The man scratched his head in wonder and the next day began to do prostrations. He did hundreds of thousands of prostrations, and when he reported the total to his teacher, his teacher responded: “That’s very nice, but wouldn’t it be better to practise the Dharma?” Puzzled, the man now thought to recite the Buddhist scriptures aloud. But when his teacher came by, he again commented: “Very good, but wouldn’t it be better to practise the Dharma?” Thoroughly bewildered, the exasperated man queried his spiritual master: “But what does that mean? I thought I have been practising the Dharma.” The teacher responded concisely: “The practice of Dharma is to change your attitude towards life and give up attachment to worldly concerns.”

The real Dharma practice is not something we can see with our eyes. Real practice is changing our mind, not just changing our behaviour so that we appear holy, blessed and others say: “Wow, what a fantastic person!” We have already spent our lives putting on various acts in an effort to convince ourselves and others that we are indeed what, in fact,

we aren't at all. We hardly need to create another facade, this time of a super-holy person. What we do need to do is change our mind, our way of viewing, interpreting and reacting to the world around and within us.

Be Honest with Your Ourselves

The first step in doing this is being honest with ourselves. Taking an accurate look at our life, we are unafraid and unashamed to acknowledge, "Everything is not completely right in my life. No matter how good the situation around me is, no matter how much money or how many friends or how great a reputation I have, still I'm not satisfied. Also, I have very little control over my moods and emotions, and can't prevent getting sick, ageing and eventually dying."

Then we check up why and how we are in this predicament. What are the causes of it? By looking at our own life, we come to understand that our experiences are closely linked with our mind. When we interpret a situation in one way and get angry about it, we are unhappy and make the

people around us miserable; when we view the same situation from another perspective, it no longer appears intolerable and we act wisely with a peaceful mind. When we are proud, it's no wonder that others act haughtily to us. On the other hand, a person with an altruistic attitude automatically attracts friends. Our experiences are based on our own attitudes and actions.

Can our current situation be changed? Of course! Since it is dependent on causes — our attitudes and actions — if we take responsibility to train ourselves to think and act in a more accurate and altruistic way, then the current perplexed dissatisfaction will cease and a joyful and beneficial situation ensue. It is up to us. We can change.

The initial step in this change is giving up attachment to worldly concerns. In other words, we stop fooling ourselves, and trying to fool others. We understand that the problem isn't that we cannot get what we want or once we do get it, it fades away or breaks. Rather, the problem is that we cling to it with over-estimating expectations in the first place. Various activities like prostrating, making offerings, chanting, meditating and so on are techniques to

help us overcome our preconceptions of attachment, anger, jealousy, pride and close-mindedness. These practices are not ends in themselves, and they are of little benefit if done with the same attachment for reputation, friends and possessions that we had before.

Once, Bengungyel, a meditator doing retreat in a cave, was expecting his benefactor to visit. As he set up offerings on his altar that morning, he did so with more care and in a much elaborate and impressive way than usual, hoping that his benefactor would think what a great practitioner he was and would give him more offerings. Later, when he realised his own corrupt motivation, he jumped up in disgust, grabbed handfuls of ashes from the ashbin and flung them over the altar while he shouted: “I throw this in the face of attachment to worldly concerns.”

In another part of Tibet, Padampa Sangye, a master with clairvoyant powers, viewed all that had happened in the cave. With delight, he declared to those around him: “Bengungyel has just made the purest offering in all Tibet!”

Internal Motivation is What Matters

The essence of the Dharma practice isn't our external performance, but our internal motivation. Real Dharma is not huge temples, pompous ceremonies, elaborate dress and intricate rituals. These things are tools that can help our mind if they are used properly, with correct motivation. We can't judge another person's motivation, nor should we waste our time trying to evaluate others' actions. We can only look at our own mind, thereby determining whether our actions, words and thoughts are beneficial or not. For that reason we must be ever attentive not to let our minds come under the influence of selfishness, attachment, anger, etc. As it says in the *Eight Verses of Thought Transformation*: "Vigilant, the moment a disturbing attitude appears, endangering myself and others, I will confront and avert it without delay." In this way, our Dharma practice becomes pure and is effective not only in leading us to temporal and ultimate happiness, but also in enabling us to make our lives beneficial for others.

Thus, if we get confused about which tradition to follow or what practice to do, let's remember

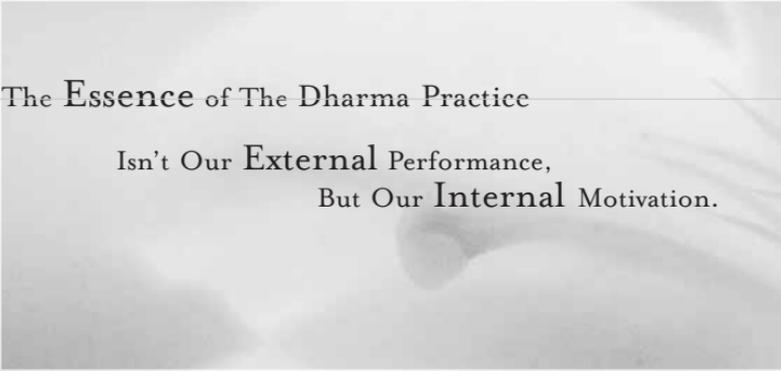
the meaning of practising Dharma. To cling with concrete conceptions to a certain religion or tradition is to build up our close-minded grasping. To become enamoured with rituals without endeavouring to learn and contemplate their meaning is simply to playact a religious role. To engage in external practices like prostrating, making offerings, chanting and so forth, with a motivation that is attached to receiving a good reputation, meeting a boyfriend or girlfriend, being praised or receiving offerings, is like putting chocolate frosting into garbage: it looks good on the outside, but it's unhealthy.

Instead, if everyday we centre ourselves by remembering the value of being a human being, if we recall our beautiful human potential and have a deep and sincere longing to make it blossom, then we'll endeavour to be true to ourselves and to others by transforming our motivations, and consequently, transforming our actions.

In addition to remembering the value and purpose of life, if we contemplate the transience of our existence and the objects and people that we are attached to, then we'll want to practise in a pure way. Sincere and pure practice that leads to so many

beneficial results is done by applying the antidotes that Buddha prescribed when afflictive attitudes arise in our minds: when anger comes, we practice patience and tolerance; for attachment, we recall transience; when jealousy arises, we counter it with sincere rejoicing in others' qualities and happiness; for pride, we remember that just as no water can stay on a pointed mountain peak, no qualities can develop in a mind inflated by pride; for close-mindedness, we let ourselves listen and reflect on a new view.

Looking holy and important on the outside brings no real happiness either now or in the future. However, if we have a kind heart and a pure motivation free of selfish, ulterior motives, a real practitioner we are indeed. Then our lives become meaningful, joyful and beneficial for others.



The **Essence** of The Dharma Practice

Isn't Our **External** Performance,
But Our **Internal** Motivation.

Chapter 2:
My Favourite Pastime:
Complaining

I don't know about you, but I frequently find myself indulging in my favourite pastime, complaining. Well, it's not exactly my favourite one, because it makes me more miserable than I was before, but it's certainly one that I engage in often enough. Of course, I don't always see what I'm doing as complaining - in fact, I often think I'm simply telling the truth about the world. But when I really look carefully, I am forced to acknowledge that my woe begone statements are actually complaints.

What constitutes complaining? One dictionary defines it as "An expression of pain, dissatisfaction, or resentment." I would add that it's a statement of dislike, blame, or judgment that we whine about repeatedly. Why say it once when we can indulge in our misery?

Contents of Complaints

What do we complain about? You name it - we can complain about it. My flight has been cancelled. The auto insurance company refused to hear my claim. It's too hot. It's too cold. My dog is in a bad mood.

We complain about our wealth, or lack of it. I

just saw a bumper sticker that said: “I’m too poor to vote Republican.” Who ever has enough money? It’s not fair that others have more than we do and that they have better opportunities to earn it.

We complain about our health. This is not limited to just the ill and elderly. Those of us who are precocious start complaining about our body from day one. “My knees hurt, my back hurts. My allergies are acting up. I have a headache. My cholesterol is too high. I’m exhausted. My heart beats irregularly. My kidneys don’t work right. My little toe is infected.”

One of the juiciest topics of complaint is others’ actions and personalities. We’re all like mental gossip columnists:

“My colleague at work doesn’t turn in his work on time.”

“My boss is too bossy.”

“My employees are ungrateful.”

“After everything I did for my kids, they moved to another town, and they don’t come home for holidays.”

“I’m fifty, and my parents are still trying to run my life.”

“This person talks too loud.”

“That one talks too softly, and I always have to ask her to repeat what she said.”

Complaining about political leaders and the government - not just our own, but others' too - is a national pastime. We bemoan unfair policies, the brutality of oppressive regimes, the injustice of the justice system, and the cruelty of the global economy. We write e-mails to friends who have the same political views as we do and hope they will do something to change the situation.

In essence, we complain about anything and everything that meets with our disapproval.

Why Do We Complain?

We complain for a variety of reasons. In all the cases, we're looking for something, even though we may not be aware what it is at the time.

Sometimes we complain because we simply want someone to recognise our suffering. Once they do, something inside us feels satisfied, but until they do, we go on and on telling our story. For example, we may tell the story of a dear one's betrayal

of our trust. When our friends try to fix our problem, we feel more frustrated. We may even feel that they're not hearing us. But when they say: "You must be very disappointed," we feel heard - our misery has been acknowledged - and we say no more.

At other times, it isn't so simple. For example, we may repeatedly complain about our health out of self-pity or the wish to gain others' sympathy. Others may show they understand, but no matter what they say or do for us, we are dissatisfied and continue to lament.

We may complain in the hope that someone will fix our problem. Instead of asking someone directly for help, we recount our sad story again and again wishing that he will get the message and change the situation for us. We may do this because we're too lazy or frightened to try solving the problem ourselves. For instance, we complain to a colleague about a disturbing situation at work in the hope that she will go inform the manager about it.

We complain to vent our emotions and our feelings of powerlessness. We criticise government policies, the corruption of CEOs, and the politicking of the politicians that we feel prevents them from

actually caring for the country. We dislike these things, but we feel powerless to change them, so we preside over what amounts to a court case - either mentally or with our friends - in which we prosecute, convict and banish the people involved.

“Venting” is often used to justify ranting to whomever about whatever we want. One friend told me that he regularly hears people say: “I just have to vent! I’m so angry, I just can’t help it.” They seem to feel that they will explode if they don’t let off some steam. But I wonder about that. Shouldn’t we take into account the consequences, for ourselves and others, of venting? In the Buddha’s teachings, we find many other options to resolve our frustration and anger without spewing out on others.

Discussing vs. Complaining

What is the difference between complaining and discussing certain topics in a constructive way? It lies in our attitude - our motivation - for speaking. Discussing a situation involves taking a more balanced approach, in which we actively try to understand the origin of the problem and think of

a remedy. In our mind we become proactive, not reactive. We assume responsibility for what is our responsibility and stop blaming others when we cannot control a situation.

Thus, we can discuss our health without complaining about it. We simply tell others the facts and go on. If we need help, we ask for it directly, instead of lamenting in the hope that someone will rescue us or feel sorry for us. Similarly, we can discuss our financial situation, a friendship gone awry, an unfair policy at work, the unco-operative attitude of a salesperson, the ills of society, the misconceptions of political leaders, or the dishonesty of CEOs without complaining about them. This is far more productive, because discussion with knowledgeable people can help give us a new perspective on the situation, which, in turn, help us deal with it more effectively.

Antidotes to Complaining

For Buddhist practitioners, several meditations act as healthy antidotes to the habit of complaining. Meditating on impermanence is a good start; seeing

that everything is transient enables us to set our priorities wisely and determine what is important in life. It becomes clear that the petty things we complain about are not important in the long run, and we let them go.

Meditating on compassion is also helpful. When our mind is imbued with compassion, we don't see others as enemies or as obstacles to our happiness. Instead, we see that they do harmful actions because they wish to be happy but don't know the correct method for attaining happiness. They are, in fact, just like us: imperfect, limited sentient beings who want happiness and not suffering. Thus, we can accept them as they are and seek to benefit them in the future. We see that our own happiness, in comparison to the problematic situations of others' experience, is not so important. In that way, we are able to view others with understanding and kindness, and automatically any inclination to complain about, blame or judge them evaporates.

Meditating on the nature of cyclic existence is another antidote. Seeing that we and others are under the influence of ignorance, anger and clinging attachment, we abandon idealistic visions that things

should be a certain way. As a friend always says to me when I mindlessly complain: “This is cyclic existence. What did you expect?” Well, I suppose that at that moment, I expected perfection, i.e. that everything should happen the way I think it should, the way I want it to. Examining the nature of cyclic existence frees us from such unrealistic thinking and from the complaining it brings.

In his *Guide to a Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*, Shantideva counsels us:

“If something can be changed, work to change it. If it cannot, why worry, be upset, and complain?”

Wise advice. We need to remember it when the urge to complain arises.

When Others Complain

What can we do when someone incessantly complains to us about something we cannot do anything to change? Depending on the situation, I’ve discovered a few ways of handling this.

One person I know is the chief of all complainers. She is melodramatic about her ailments, sucks others into her predicaments, and tries to turn all attention to her suffering. At first I avoided her, since I disliked hearing her complaints. When that didn't work, I told her that she had nothing to complain about. That definitely backfired. Finally, I learned that if I earnestly smile and am playful, she loosens up. For example, in our classes, she would consistently be asking others to move because she was so uncomfortable. Since I sat directly in front of her, her complaints affected me. At first my mind recoiled with: "You have more space than anyone else!" Later, I became more tolerant and would joke with her about the "throne" she had made to sit on. I pretended to lean back and rest on her desk which edged into my back. She would tickle me, and we've become friends.

Another technique is to change the subject. I had an elderly relative who, whenever I visited, would complain about every member of the family. Needless to say, this was boring, and I was dismayed to see him work himself into a bad mood. So, in the middle of a tale, I would take something he had said and

lead the discussion in another direction. If we were complaining about someone's cooking, I would ask if he had looked at the delicious sounding-recipes in the Sunday paper. We would begin to talk about the paper, and he would forget his previous complaints in preference to more satisfying topics of discussion.

Reflective listening is also an aid. Here we take someone's suffering seriously and listen with a compassionate heart. We reflect back to the person the content or the feeling he or she expresses: "It sounds like the diagnosis frightened you." "You were relying on your son to take care of that, and he was so busy he forgot. That left you in the lurch."

Sometimes, we get the feeling that others complain simply to hear themselves talk, that they don't really want to resolve their difficulties. We sense that they've told the story many times in the past to various people and are stuck in a rut of their own making. In this case, I put the ball in their court by asking: "What ideas do you have for what can be done?" When they ignore the question and return to complaining, I ask again: "What ideas do you have for what could help in this situation?" In other words, I refocus them on the question at

hand, instead of allowing them to get lost in their tales. Eventually, they begin to see that they could change their view of the situation or their behaviour.

But when all else fails, I return to my favourite pastime - complaining - when I can ignore their ailments and sink into the sticky slime of my own. Oh, the luxury of venting my judgments and airing my troubles!

Chapter 3:
Speaking about
the Faults of Others

 vow not to talk about the faults of others.” In the Zen tradition, this is one of the bodhisattva vows. For fully ordained monastics, the same principle is expressed in the payattika vow to abandon slander. It is also contained in the Buddha’s recommendation to all of us to avoid the ten destructive actions, the fifth of which is using our speech to create disharmony.

The Motivation

What an undertaking! I can’t speak for you, the reader, but I find this very difficult. I have an old habit of talking about the faults of others. In fact, it’s so habitual that sometimes I don’t realise I’ve done it until afterwards.

What lies behind this tendency to put others down? One of my teachers, Geshe Ngawang Dhargye, used to say: “You get together with a friend and talk about the faults of this person and the misdeeds of that one. Then you go on to discuss others’ mistakes and negative qualities. In the end, the two of you feel good because you’ve agreed you’re the two best people in the world.”

When I reflect and ponder over what he said, I have to acknowledge he's right. Fuelled by insecurity, I mistakenly think that if others are wrong, bad or fault-ridden, then in comparison I must be right, good and capable. Does the strategy of putting others down to build up my own self-esteem work? Hardly.

Another situation in which we speak about others' faults is when we're angry with them. Here we may talk about their faults for a variety of reasons. Sometimes it's to win other people over to our side. "If I tell these other people about the argument Bob and I had and convince them that he is wrong and I'm right before Bob can tell them about the argument, then they'll side with me." Underlying that is the thought: "If others think I'm right, then I must be." It's a weak attempt to convince ourselves we're okay when we haven't spent the time honestly evaluating our own motivations and actions.

Sometimes, we may also talk about others' faults because we're jealous of them. We want to be respected and appreciated as much as they are. In the back of our minds, there's the thought: "If others see the bad qualities of the people I think are better than me, then instead of honouring and helping them,

they'll praise and assist me." Or we think: "If the boss thinks that person is unqualified, she'll promote me instead." Does this strategy win others' respect and appreciation? Not quite.

Some people "psychoanalyse" others, using their half-baked knowledge of pop-psychology to put someone down. Comments such as "he's borderline" or "she's paranoid" make it sound as if we have authoritative insight into someone's internal workings, when in reality we disdain their faults because our own ego was affronted. Casually psychoanalysing others can be especially harmful, for it may unfairly cause a third party to be biased or suspicious.

The Results

What are the results of talking about others' faults? First, we become known as a busybody. Others won't want to confide in us because they're afraid we'll tell others, adding our own judgments to make them look bad. I am cautious of people who chronically complain about others. I figure that if they speak that way about one person, they will probably speak

that way about me, given the right conditions. In other words, I don't trust people who continuously criticise others.

Second, we have to deal with the person whose mistakes we publicised when they find out what we said, which, by the time they hear it, has been amplified in intensity. That person may tell others our faults in order to retaliate, not an exceptionally mature action, but one in keeping with our own actions.

Third, some people get stirred up when they hear about others' faults. For example, if one person at an office or factory talks behind the back of another, everyone in the workplace may get angry and gang up on the person who has been criticised. This can spark off backbiting throughout the workplace and cause factions to form. And this is hardly conducive for a harmonious work environment.

Fourth, are we happy when our mind picks faults in others? Almost not. When we focus on negativities or mistakes, our own mind isn't very happy. Thoughts such as, "Sue has a hot temper. Joe bungled the job. Liz is incompetent. Sam is unreliable," aren't conducive for our own mental happiness.

Fifth, by speaking badly of others, we create the cause for others to speak badly of us. This may occur in this life if the person we have criticised puts us down, or it may happen in future lives when we find ourselves unjustly blamed or scapegoated. When we are the recipients of others' harsh speech, we need to recall that this is a result of our own actions: we created the cause; now the result comes. We put negativity in the universe and in our own mindstream; now it is coming back to us. There's no sense being angry and blaming anyone else if we were the ones who created the principal cause of our problem.

Close Resemblances

There are a few situations in which seemingly speaking of others' faults may be appropriate or necessary. Although these instances closely resemble criticising others, they are not actually the same. What differentiates them? Our motivation.

Speaking of others' faults has an element of maliciousness in it and is always motivated by self-concern. Our ego wants to get something out of this;

it wants to look good by making others look bad. On the other hand, appropriate discussion of others' faults is done with concern and/or compassion; we want to clarify a situation, prevent harm or offer help.

Let's look at a few examples. When we are asked to write a reference for someone who is not qualified, we have to be truthful, speaking of the person's talents as well as his weaknesses so that the prospective employer or landlord can determine if this person is able to do what is expected. Similarly, we may have to warn someone of another's tendencies in order to avert a potential problem. In both these cases, our motivation is not to criticise another, nor do we embellish her inadequacies. Rather, we try to give an unbiased description of what we see.

Sometimes, we suspect that our negative view of a person is limited and biased, and we talk to a friend who does not know the other person but who can help us see other angles. This gives us a fresh, more constructive perspective and ideas about how to get along with the person. Our friend might also point out our buttons - our defences and sensitive areas - that are wired in exaggerating the other's defects, so that we can work on them.

At other times, we may be confused by someone's actions and consult a mutual friend in order to learn more about that person's background, how she might be looking at the situation, or what we could reasonably expect from her. Or, we may be dealing with a person whom we suspect has some problems, and we consult an expert in the field to learn how to work with such a person. In both these instances, our motivation is to help the other and to resolve the difficulty.

In another case, a friend may unknowingly be involved in a harmful behaviour, or act in a way that puts others off. In order to protect him from the results of his own blindness, we may say something. Here we do so without a critical tone of voice or a judgmental attitude, but with compassion, in order to point out his fault or mistake so he can remedy it. However, in doing so, we must let go of our agenda that wants the other person to change. People must often learn from their own experience; we cannot control them. We can only be there for them.

The Underlying Attitude

In order to stop pointing out others' faults, we have to work on our underlying mental habit of judging others. Even if we don't say anything to or about them, as long as we are mentally tearing someone down, it's likely we'll communicate that through giving someone a condescending look, ignoring him in a social situation, or rolling our eyes when his name is brought up in conversation.

The opposite of judging and criticising others is to regard their good qualities with kindness. This is a matter of training our minds to look at what is positive in others rather than what doesn't meet our approval. Such training makes the difference between our being happy, open and loving or depressed, disconnected and bitter.

We need to try cultivating the habit of noticing what is beautiful, endearing, vulnerable, brave, struggling, hopeful, kind and inspiring in others. If we pay attention to that, we won't be focusing on their faults. Our joyful attitude and tolerant speech that result from this will enrich those around us and help nourish contentment, happiness and love within

ourselves. The quality of our own lives thus depends on whether we find fault with our experience or see what is beautiful in it.

Seeing the faults of others is about missing opportunities to love. It's also about not having the skills to properly nourish ourselves with heart-warming interpretations as opposed to feeding ourselves a mental diet of poison. When we are habituated with mentally picking out the faults of others, we tend to do this with ourselves as well. This can lead us to devalue our entire lives. What a tragedy it is when we overlook the preciousness and opportunity of our lives and our Buddha potential.

Thus we must lighten up and accept ourselves as we are in this moment while we simultaneously try to become better human beings in the future. This doesn't mean we ignore our mistakes, but that we are not so pejorative about them. We appreciate our own humanness; we have confidence in our potential and in the heart-warming qualities we have developed so far.

What are these qualities? Let's keep things simple: they are our ability to listen, to smile, to forgive, to help out in small ways. Nowadays, we have lost

sight of what is really valuable on a personal level and instead tend to look to what publicly brings acclaim. We need to come back to appreciating ordinary beauty and stop our infatuation with the high-achieving, the polished and the famous.

Everyone wants to be loved - to have his or her positive traits noticed and acknowledged, to be cared for and treated with respect. Almost everyone is afraid of being judged, criticised and rejected as unworthy. Cultivating the mental habit that sees our own and others' beauty brings happiness to ourselves and others; it enables us to feel and to extend love. Leaving aside the mental habit that finds faults prevents suffering for ourselves and others. This should be the heart of our spiritual practice. For this reason, His Holiness, the Dalai Lama said: "My religion is kindness."

We may still see our own and others' imperfections, but our mind is gentler, more accepting and spacious. People don't care so much if we see their faults, when they are confident that we care for them and appreciate what is admirable in them.

Speaking with Understanding and Compassion

The opposite of talking about others' faults of others is speaking with understanding and compassion. For those engaged in spiritual practice and for those who want to live harmoniously with others, this is essential. When we look at others' good qualities, we feel happy that they exist. Acknowledging people's good qualities to them and to others makes our own mind happy; it promotes harmony in the environment; and it gives people useful feedback.

Praising others should be part of our daily life and a part of our Dharma practice. Imagine what our life would be like if we trained our minds to dwell on others' talents and good attributes. We would feel much happier and so would they! We would get along better with others, and our families, work environments, and living situations would be much more harmonious. We place the seeds from such positive actions on our mindstream, creating the cause for harmonious relationships and success in our spiritual and temporal aims.

An interesting experiment is to try to say something nice to or about someone everyday for

a month. Try it. It makes us much more aware of what we say and why. It encourages us to change our perspective so that we notice others' good qualities. Doing so also improves our relationships tremendously.

A few years ago, I gave this as a homework assignment at a Dharma class, encouraging people to try to praise even someone they didn't like very much. The next week I asked the students how they did. One man said that the first day he had to make something up in order to speak positively to a fellow colleague. But after that, the man was so much nicer to him that it was easy to see his good qualities and speak about them!



We need to try cultivating the habit of noticing what is beautiful, endearing, vulnerable, brave, struggling, hopeful, kind and inspiring in others.

Our joyful attitude and tolerant speech that result from this will enrich those around us and help nourish contentment, happiness and love within ourselves.

Chapter 4:
Practising Buddhism
in Daily Life

Many people have the misconception that spiritual life or religious life is somewhere up there in the sky – an ethereal or mystical reality – and that our everyday life is too mundane and not so nice. Often, people think that to be a spiritual person, we must ignore or neglect our everyday life, and go into another special realm.

Actually, I think being a spiritual person means becoming a real human being. Thich Nhat Hanh, a well-known Vietnamese monk, said: “It is not so important whether you walk on water or walk in space. The true miracle is to walk on earth.” And it’s true. Becoming a kind human being is probably the greatest miracle we can perform.

Once I gave a talk to a group of school children in Hong Kong. One child asked: “Can you bend spoons with your mind?” Another queried: “Has God ever talked to you?” They were very disappointed when I said: “No.” I went on to explain that for me a real miracle is becoming a kind human being. If you have psychic powers but lack of a kind heart, the powers are of no use. In fact, they could even be disadvantageous. People may get very upset if they find all their spoons have been bent!

Upon Waking Up

How do we cultivate a kind heart? It is not enough to tell ourselves that we should be nice, because telling ourselves what we should or should not be, feel or do doesn't make us become that way. Filling ourselves with "shoulds" often just makes us feel guilty because we never are what we think we should be. We need to know how to actually transform our mind. In other words, we must realise the disadvantages of being self-centred. We must truly want to develop a kind heart, not just keep thinking that we should develop a kind heart. In the morning, when we first wake up, before getting out of bed, before thinking about what we will eat for breakfast or which obnoxious jerk we will see at the office, we can start the day by thinking:

"Today as much as possible, I won't harm anybody. Today as much as possible I am going to try be of service to others and to benefit them. Today I want to do all actions, be it big or small, with the aim that all living beings can attain the long-term happiness of enlightenment."

Setting a positive motivation the first thing in the morning is very beneficial. When we first wake up, our mind is very subtle and delicate. If we set a strong positive motivation at this time, there is a greater chance of it staying with us and influencing us throughout the day. After generating our positive motivation, we get out of bed, wash, maybe have a cup of tea, and then meditate or recite prayers. By starting the day in this way, we get in touch with ourselves and become our own friend by treasuring and reinforcing our good qualities.

Finding Time to Meditate Each Day

Sometimes, it is difficult to find time to meditate each day. But we always have time to watch TV. We always have time to go shopping. We always have time to get a snack from the refrigerator. Why is it that the 24 hours run out when it is time to meditate? When we understand the value and effect of spiritual practice, then it will become a high priority in our life, and when something is very important, we find time for it. In this way, try to set up a daily meditation practice of maybe 15 or 30

minutes in the morning. To do that, we might have to experience the “incredible sacrifice” of giving up 15 or 30 minutes of television the previous evening so we can go to bed a little earlier. In the same way that we always find time to eat because food nourishes our body, we will find time to meditate and recite some prayers because it nourishes us spiritually. When we respect ourselves spiritually, we respect ourselves as human beings. Nourishing ourselves in that way then becomes a very important priority.

Morning Meditation

In the morning, it is good to begin your meditation session with a few prayers and cultivate the altruistic intention to benefit others by doing the meditation. Then do the breathing meditation for a while. Sit calmly, experience your breath going in and out, and be aware of the breath nourishing you. Just be in the present moment with the breath, and let all the discursive thoughts and worries subside. You may want to chant Kuan Yin’s (Avalokiteshvara’s) mantra or that of the Buddha. It is helpful to remember the Buddha’s qualities at this time for it inspires us to

emulate the Buddha's kindness, wisdom and skill in our daily activities. Or you may do an analytic meditation, thinking about the meaning of a particular teaching the Buddha gave and applying it to your own life. This also steers your energy in a very positive direction first thing in the morning.

Some people say: "I have children. How can I meditate or say prayers in the morning when they need my attention?" One way is to get up earlier than your children. Another idea is to invite your children to meditate or chant with you. I remember once I was staying with my brother's family. My niece, who was about six or seven at that time, used to come into my room because we were the first two to wake up in the morning. As I was reciting prayers or meditating, I explained to her that this is a time when I am quiet and do not want to be disturbed. She would come in and sometimes she would draw. Other times, she would sit on my lap. Several times she asked me to sing to her, and I would chant prayers and mantras out loud. She really liked this and did not disturb me at all.

It is very good for children to see their parents sit still and be calm. That gives them the idea that

maybe they too can do the same. If Mum and Dad are always busy, running around, talking on the phone, stressed out, or collapsed in front of the TV, the kids will also be like this. Is this what you want for your children? If you want your children to learn certain attitudes or behaviours, you have to cultivate them yourselves. Otherwise, how will your children learn? If you care about your children, you have to care about yourselves as well and be mindful of living a healthy and balanced life for their benefit as well as for your own.

You can also teach your children how to make offerings to the Buddha and how to recite simple prayers and mantras. Once, I stayed with a friend and her three-year-old daughter. Every morning when we got up, we would all bow three times to the Buddha. Then, the little girl would give the Buddha a present — a cookie or some fruit — and the Buddha would give her a present also, a sweet or a cracker. It was very nice for the child, because at age three she was establishing a good relationship with the Buddha and at the same time was learning to be generous and share things. When my friend cleaned the house, did chores or went places with her daughter, they

would chant mantras together. The little girl loved the melodies of the mantras. This helped her because whenever she got upset or frightened, she knew she could chant mantras to calm herself down.

Greeting Others

After your morning meditation, have breakfast. Greeting your family in the morning is also part of Dharma practice. Many people are grumpy in the morning. They sit at the breakfast table, poring over the newspaper or reading the back of the cereal box for the umpteenth time. When their bright-eyed children greet them, they grunt and, without looking up, keep reading. When their partner asks them a question, they either don't respond, or they glance at them for a moment with a look that says: "Don't bother me." Later, they wonder why they have problems in the family!

Some of us are tired in the morning. But if we generate a motivation of kindness upon awakening, that will help us to overcome the habit of being grumpy and to cultivate a new habit of rejoicing in our fortune. "How fortunate I am to be alive.

How wonderful that I am to live with the people I cherish. How fortunate I am to have food to eat today.” Reflecting in this manner makes it easier to greet your family with love, to look into their eyes with the genuine affection that’s in your heart.

Chatting warmly with your family for a few minutes in the morning can also get both you and them off to a good start for the day. In this way, parents will get to know their children and won’t simply be drill sergeants. It’s easy to bark orders at your children: “Get up!” “Brush your teeth!” “Why are you wearing that? It looks terrible! Change another set of clothes!” “Stop playing around and eat breakfast.” “Hurry up and get to school. You’re late.” Naturally, many children will react as unruly subordinates when treated in this way. But if you greet your children with love and firmly help them navigate everything in their morning routine, they’ll be happier and so will you. Take a few minutes and learn about your children’s interests. What do they think about? What are they curious about? Learn about their friends. If you’re involved in your children’s lives when they’re young, you’ll be able to instil good values in them. Then, when they’re older

you'll be more confident that they'll be able to deal with situations, and you won't worry so much.

Practising Dharma at the Workplace

Let's return to your daily practice. After your morning meditation, you have breakfast and then set off for work. How are you going to practise Dharma at work? First, try to remember the kind heart and the motivation you cultivated in the morning. Throughout the day, continually remind yourself that you don't want to harm anybody, that you want to be of service to them, and that you seek to do all actions for the ultimate enlightenment of yourself and others. To remind yourself of this, you can use a frequent event as a trigger to call you back to your motivation. For example, every time you stop at a red light, instead of being irritated and thinking: "Why is this red light taking so long? I'm late for work!" think: "Today, I want to have a kind heart towards others." Thus the red light becomes an opportunity to remember the kind heart. When the telephone rings, instead of rushing to pick it up, first think: "May I be of service to whomever is on the

line.” Then answer the phone. Every time your pager goes off, calmly come back to the kind heart, then respond to the call. A friend told me that her trigger to come back to the kind heart was her children calling for her. Since this happened frequently throughout the day, she became familiar with the kind heart and also was much more patient with her children.

Throughout the day, try to be aware of what you are thinking, feeling, saying and doing, instead of living on “automatic” mode. When we live on automatic mode, we go through life reacting to things but never really experiencing what life is about. This is why we feel out of touch with ourselves, like strangers to ourselves. For example, you get in the car and drive to work. When you get to work, if somebody asked you: “What did you think about during the half hour you were driving?” you probably wouldn’t know. We are unaware of what is going on inside us. Yet, a lot is going on and this influences how we feel about ourselves and how we relate to other people.

Or as Venerable Zopa Rinpoche teaches, when you go to work, contemplate the following: “I must

achieve enlightenment in order to lead each and every sentient being to enlightenment. Therefore, I am going to do service for sentient beings by going to work.” If you are working in order to provide for your family, it is a service to sentient beings. If you do not have to provide for your family, you nevertheless need the necessary material conditions in order to practise the Dharma so that you may attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.

While you are at work or in the office, remember the kindness of the other sentient beings who gave you the job and who make it possible for you to earn a living. Thinking in this way helps one to avoid generating negative emotions like anger at work.

Cultivating Mindfulness

The antidote to living on automatic mode is to cultivate mindfulness. Mindfulness means being aware of what we are thinking, feeling, saying and doing each and every moment. It also means being mindful of our ethical values and of the kind heart, so that we can live according to them in our daily

lives. By cultivating this awareness, we will no longer be spaced out, merely reacting to things, and then wondering why we are so confused and exhausted at the end of the day. If we are mindful, we will notice that we have a kind heart and will be more aware of enriching it and letting our actions flow from it. We might also become more aware when we are upset, irritated, angry, or are on the verge of scolding somebody. If we realise that, we can come back to our breath, come back to our kind heart, instead of throwing our negative energy out to the world.

Being Mindful of Living in an Interdependent World

When we cultivate mindfulness, we also become more mindful of how we interact with our environment. We realise that we live in an interdependent world, and if we pollute our environment, we are affecting ourselves, our children and other living beings. Because we are mindful of being kind, we will curtail the ways in which we pollute the environment. For instance, we will carpool when going to work or school, instead

of using up gasoline in a car by ourselves. We will recycle the things we use: paper, cans, plastic containers, bottles, glass jars and newspapers. We know that if we throw these away in the garbage, we are destroying our planet and are affecting other beings in a negative way. Thus, we will re-use our plastic bags and paper bags when we go to the supermarket. In addition, we will not leave our air-conditioners or heaters on when we are not at home, and will not use products, such as styrofoam whose production releases many pollutants into the air.

If the Buddha was still alive today, he would probably establish vows that said we have to recycle and stop wasting resources. Many of our monastic vows arose because lay people complained to the Buddha about what monks or nuns did. Each time this happened, the Buddha would establish a precept in order to curb the detrimental behaviour. If the Buddha was still alive today, people would complain to him: “So many Buddhists throw out their tin cans, glass jars and newspapers! They use disposable cups, chopsticks and plates, which not only produce more garbage but also cause the destruction of many trees. They do not seem to care about the environment

and the living beings in it!” I would feel pretty embarrassed if I was doing that and someone complained to the Buddha about my behaviour, wouldn’t you? That’s why I think the Buddha would definitely set down vows saying that we have to recycle and to curtail consumption.

Being Mindful of Our Actions

Mindfulness also enables us to be aware if we are about to act destructively as we go through the day. Mindfulness says: “Uh oh! I’m getting angry,” or “I’m being greedy,” or “I’m feeling jealous.” Then we can apply the various antidotes the Buddha taught to help us calm our minds. For example, if we discover we are annoyed and anger is arising, we can stop and look at the situation from the other person’s point of view. When we do this, we recognise they want to be happy, and because they aren’t happy, they are doing that action we find objectionable. Then instead of harming them out of anger, we will be more compassionate and understanding, and will work with them to negotiate an agreement.

But how do we do this when a quarrel is just

about to start or we're already in the middle of one? We have to practise beforehand, in our meditation practice. In the heat of the situation, it is difficult to remember what the Buddha taught if we haven't practised it already when we were calm and peaceful. In the same way that a football team practises on a regular basis, we need to meditate on patience and to recite prayers daily to get well-trained. Then when we encounter a situation in daily life, we will be able to use the teachings.

Offering Our Food

Another practice to increase our mindfulness and help us remember our motivation is offering our food before we eat. As taught by Venerable Zopa Rinpoche, before you eat or drink, think to yourself: "I am going to make this food (drink) offering to Guru Shakyamuni Buddha, who is the embodiment of all the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha, in order to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all mother sentient beings." Imagine the food as a very pure and sweet nectar, something very delicious that gives great bliss and increases our wisdom, not our attachment,

when we eat. Then we visualise a small Buddha made of light at our heart. When we eat, we offer this nectar to the Buddha at our heart. Imagine the Buddha at our heart experiencing bliss as we eat and radiating light that fills us up. To do this, you don't need to sit in perfect meditation position in the middle of a restaurant! You can visualise and contemplate in this manner while waiting for the food. While your companions or business associates continue to chat, you can do this visualisation and offer your food to the Buddha without anyone knowing. Sometimes, for example, when you're at home with your family, you can pause and focus on offering your food. It's very nice for a family to recite together a prayer offering their food. I stayed with one family and their six-year-old son led us in reciting the prayer. It was very touching.

When you eat, eat mindfully. Be aware of the effort other people put into growing, transporting, and preparing the food. Realise your interdependence with other living beings and how much benefit you have received from them, such as the food you eat. If we reflect in this way before each meal, we will feel very happy and grateful when we eat, and we will

eat more mindfully. And if we eat mindfully each time, we won't overeat, and then we won't have to spend so much money on special diets to lose weight!

It is important to eat in a dignified manner. Sometimes we see people in a cafeteria line who haven't even paid for the food yet and are already shovelling it into their mouths. This is eating on automatic. It resembles a dog who runs to the bowl and slurps up the food. When we do this reflection and offer our food to the Buddha at our heart, we eat more slowly and are more relaxed. This is how human beings eat.

Reviewing the Day

In this way, we maintain mindfulness and enrich our kind heart as we go through the day. When we reach home in the evening, instead of collapsing in front of the TV or dropping off to sleep on the bed, we can take a few minutes to sit quietly by ourselves. We reflect about and come to terms with what happened during the day. We look back over our day and think: "What went well today? Did I act with a kind heart?" We notice the instances

when we acted kindly and rejoice. We dedicate that merit, that positive potential, for the enlightenment of ourselves and others.

In reviewing the day, we may discover that we were angry, jealous or greedy. We didn't realise it at the time when it was happening. But looking back over the day, we don't feel so good about what happened. It may have been our attitude, or what we said to somebody, or how we acted. To remedy this, we develop regret and do some purification practice so we can forgive ourselves and let that negative energy go. In this way, we "clean up" emotionally and resolve any uncomfortable feelings or misdirected actions that may have arisen during the day. Having done this, our sleep will be peaceful. When you lie down, imagine the Buddha sitting on your pillow and visualise putting your head in the Buddha's lap when you go to sleep. This is very comforting and helps you to remember the Buddha's good qualities and to have better dreams.

Our Life Becomes Meaningful

Practising Dharma is not difficult or time-consuming.

We always have time; there are always 24 hours in a day. If we direct our mind in a positive direction, we can transform whatever action we do onto the path to enlightenment. In this way, the Dharma becomes part of our life in an organic way. Getting up in the morning is Dharma, eating and going to work is Dharma, sleeping is Dharma. By transforming our attitude in the midst of daily activities, our life becomes very meaningful.

Chapter 5:
Transforming Our Daily
Activities

Aside from the methods taught in the previous chapter, you may also like to transform your daily activities and cultivate a kind heart with the following methods as taught by Venerable Zopa Rinpoche.

Waking Up

In the morning when you wake up, visualise the Buddha on the crown of your head and think:

*“How fortunate that I’m still alive. Today, once again, I have the opportunity to practise the Dharma. Once again I have the opportunity to take the essence of this human rebirth which has so much freedom and richness. The great essence to be taken from this opportunity is to practise **bodhicitta**, the mind that is dedicated to attaining enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings by renouncing myself and cherishing others. Cherishing only myself is the greatest obstacle to being truly happy for oneself and is especially the greatest hindrance to bringing about the happiness of all sentient beings. So, from now on, I will never allow myself to be under the control of the self-cherishing thought.*”

*Cherishing others is the best course that not only successfully bring about my own happiness but also the happiness that all sentient beings desire. Therefore, from now on, I will never separate from the precious **bodhicitta**, the mind cherishing other sentient beings, for even one moment. With the **bodhicitta**, and the mind that cherishes others, I will live my life.”*

Then, make a sincere request to the Buddha:

“Whether my life is happy or painful, may whatever actions I do with my body, speech and mind always become only the cause to lead quickly the pitiful mother sentient beings throughout infinite space to enlightenment.”

Visualise that Guru Shakyamuni Buddha is extremely pleased with your request. He melts into light, which flows down through your crown to your heart, blessing, inspiring and transforming your mind. Then think: “I have received all of the Buddha’s qualities.” Next, imagine a small Buddha made of light appears at your heart. Throughout the

day, think of the Buddha constantly. In this way, you will become more mindful of what you do, say and think, as you will be aware of the Buddha witnessing it.

Also read and contemplate the “Eight Verses of Thought Transformation”:

*With the thought of attaining enlightenment
For the welfare of all beings,
Who are more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel,
I will constantly practise holding them dear.*

*Whenever I am with others
I will practise seeing myself as the lowest of all,
And from the very depths of my heart
I will respectfully hold others as supreme.*

*In all actions I will examine my mind
And the moment a disturbing attitude arises,
Endangering myself and others,
I will firmly confront and avert it.*

*Whenever I meet a person of bad nature
Who is overwhelmed by negative energy and*

*intense suffering,
I will hold such a rare one dear,
As if I had found a precious treasure.*

*When others, out of jealousy,
Mistreat me with abuse, slander and so on,
I will practise accepting defeat
And offering the victory to them.*

*When someone I have benefited
And in whom I have placed great trust
Hurts me very badly,
I will practise seeing that person as my
supreme teacher.*

*In short, I will offer directly and indirectly
Every benefit and happiness to all beings,
my mothers.
I will practise in secret taking upon myself
All their harmful actions and sufferings.*

*Without these practices being defiled by the
stains of the eight worldly concerns
And by perceiving all phenomena as illusory,*

*I will practise without grasping to release all beings
From the bondage of the disturbing unsubdued
mind and karma.*

Enjoying Sense Objects

Whatever sense objects you enjoy during the day - clothes, music, beautiful scenery and so forth - consider that you are offering them to Guru Shakyamuni Buddha who is at your heart. In this way, you continuously make offerings to the Buddha, thus creating a great store of positive potential. Plus, you will become less attached to sense pleasures and will begin to enjoy them with a peaceful mind.

Making Offerings on the Altar

Recite silently to yourself:

*“I am going to make these offerings in order to
achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all pitiful
mother sentient beings who have been kind to me
since beginningless rebirths.”*

Immediately consecrate whatever you offer by saying, “*OM AH HUM.*”

When you look at the pictures and statues of the Buddhas and holy beings on your altar, think all of them as the Guru and the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha of the ten directions. Offer to them with this recognition, and imagine that they generate great bliss by receiving your offerings. Think that you are offering to the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, arhats and sanghas of the ten directions. Offer to the statues of the Buddhas and deities (which represent Buddha’s holy body), to all the scriptures (which represent the Buddha’s holy speech), and to all the stupas (which represent the Buddha’s holy mind) that exist in all ten directions. This includes making offerings to all holy objects in Tibet, in India and in each person’s home where there is a holy object. This is the most skilful way to accumulate merit. In this way, you make offerings to each and every holy object without needing to take even one step or spend even one dollar to travel to those places. By thinking that all the statues, Buddhas, bodhisattvas and so forth are manifestations of the Guru, you accumulate the highest merit.

After offering, keep this thought:

“Whatever happiness and virtue I have accumulated, may all sentient beings receive it, and whatever suffering sentient beings have, may it ripen upon me.”

Then dedicate the positive potential.

Bathing

While showering or bathing, it is good to reflect this:

“With this bath, I’m transforming this action into the cause to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.”

By thinking in a new way, you can make your shower or bath a purification practice. One way to think is that the water is very blissful and you are offering it to the Buddha at your heart. Another way is to visualise whichever manifestation of the Buddha you feel a strong connection with (for example, Chenresig or Tara) above your head and think that

the bathing water is flowing from his/her hand. The water is the nature of wisdom and it is making your mind clear so you can practise the path for the benefit of sentient beings. While you are showering, think that all negative karmas, sicknesses and interfering forces are cleansed by the wisdom realising emptiness and that you receive all the realisations and qualities of the Buddha.

Sleeping

At the end of the day it is important to purify the negative actions created during the day. The most powerful method to do this is by means of the four opponent powers:

1. Taking refuge and generating bodhicitta.
2. Having regret for the negative actions you have done.
3. Doing remedial actions, i.e. a purification practice.
4. Determining not to do the action again in the future.

By doing this, it stops the karma from multiplying each day, each week, each month. It also purifies

the negative karma accumulated since beginningless time. By thus cleansing your obstacles, you have the opportunity to become enlightened.

Before going to bed, think:

“I take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha until I am enlightened. By practising generosity and the other far-reaching attitudes, may I attain Buddhahood for the benefit of the migrating beings.”

Visualise Guru Vajrasattva on your crown. Light and nectar flow down from his heart into you and purify all negative karmas and that which obscure yourself and others. While visualising in this way, recite Vajrasattva’s mantra at least twenty-eight times:

Om Vajrasattva Hum.

Then Vajrasattva says to you: “All of your negative karmas and that which obscure are completely purified. Be happy about this.” Vajrasattva absorbs to your heart and blesses your mind.

Dedicate the positive potential:

*May the precious bodhi mind,
Not yet born arise and grow.
May that born have no decline,
But increase forever more.*

In all my lives, with the Victorious One, Lama Tsong Khapa, acting in person as the Mahayana Guru, may I never turn aside for even an instant from the excellent path praised by the Victorious Ones.

Due to the positive potentials accumulated by myself and others in the past, present and future, may anyone who merely sees, hears, remembers, touches or talks to me be freed in that very instant from all sufferings and abide in happiness forever.

When you go to bed, think:

“I am going to practise sleeping yoga in order to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.”

Lie down in the lion position, which is how Buddha lay when he passed away: lie on your right side, with your right hand under your cheek. Your left hand is on your left thigh, and your legs are extended. Recall the kindness and sufferings of sentient beings and go to sleep all the while maintaining thoughts of loving-kindness towards them. Visualise Guru Shakyamuni Buddha on your pillow, and put your head in his lap. Very gentle light flows from the Buddha into you, and by remembering the Buddha's enlightened qualities with devotion, fall asleep.

Chapter 6:
Buddhism In Modern Society

Appreciating Our Advantageous Circumstances

We are extraordinarily fortunate to have the circumstances that are presently available to us for Dharma practice. In both 1993 and 1994, I went to Mainland China on a pilgrimage and visited many temples there. Seeing the situation of Buddhism there made me appreciate the fortune we have here. However, we often take our freedom, material prosperity, spiritual masters and the Buddha's teachings for granted and are blind to the wonderful opportunities that we have to practise. For example, we take for granted our ability to gather together to learn the Dharma. But this is not the case in many places. For example, when I was on a pilgrimage at Jiu Hua Shan, Kshitigarbha's Holy Mountain, the abbess of a nunnery asked me to give a talk to the pilgrims there. But my friends from Shanghai who were travelling with me said: "No, you can't do that. The police will come and all of us will get into trouble." We had to be careful about even an innocent activity like teaching the Dharma. Only when the abbess said that she was a friend of the police did my friends say it was safe for me to teach.

It is important that we reflect on the advantages and good circumstances that we have to practise right now. Otherwise, we will take them for granted and they will go to waste. We tend to select one or two small problems in our life, emphasise them, and blow them out of proportion. Then we think: “I can’t be happy. I can’t practise the Dharma,” and this thought itself prevents us from enjoying our life and making it meaningful. We, human beings, are very funny. When something bad happens in our lives we ask: “Why me? Why is this happening to me?” But when we wake up every morning and are alive and healthy and our family is well, we never ask: “Why me? Why am I so fortunate?”

Not only should we open our eyes to all the things that are going right and well in our lives, but we should also recognise that they are the results of our own previously created positive actions or karma. Thus, it is helpful to think: “Whoever I was in a previous life, I did a lot of positive actions which make it possible for me to enjoy so many good circumstances now. So in this life I should also act constructively by being ethical and kind so that in the future such fortune will continue.”

Appreciating Our Problems

Appreciating our advantageous circumstances is important as is appreciating our problems. Why appreciate our problems? Because the difficult situations in our lives are the ones that make us grow the most. Take a minute and think about a difficult time in your life, a time when you had a lot of problems. Didn't you learn something valuable from that experience? You wouldn't be the person you are now without having gone through those difficulties. We may have gone through a painful time in our life, but we emerged with stronger inner resources and a better understanding of life. Seen in this way, even our problems enable us to become better people and aid us on the path to enlightenment.

Before we take refuge in the Three Jewels — the Buddhas, the Dharma and the Sangha — it is helpful to visualise them in the space in front of us. That is, we imagine the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and arhats in a Pureland. We are there too, surrounded by all sentient beings. A Pureland is a place where all the circumstances are conducive to practising the Dharma. When I visualised being in a Pureland,

I used to imagine only the people I liked and left out the people with whom I felt uncomfortable, threatened, insecure or fearful. It was nice to imagine being in a place where everything was very pleasant and it was easy to practise the Dharma.

But there was once when I was visualising the Pureland, all the people who were giving me problems were there too! I recognised that if a Pureland is a place conducive for Dharma practice, then I also need the people who harm me to be there, because they help me to practise. In fact, sometimes those who harm us help us to practise the Dharma more than those who help us. The people who help us, give us gifts and tell us how wonderful, talented and intelligent we are often cause us to get puffed up. On the other hand, the people who harm us show us very clearly how much resentment and jealousy we have and how attached we are to our reputations. They help us to see our attachments and aversions and they point out the things we need to work on in ourselves. Sometimes they help us even more than our teachers do in this respect.

For example, our Dharma teachers tell us: “Try to forgive other people, try not to be angry. Jealousy

and pride are defilements, so try not to follow them because they will cause you and others difficulties.” We answer: “Yes, yes, that’s true. But I don’t have those negative qualities. However, the people who harm me are very resentful, jealous and attached!” Even though our Dharma teachers point out our faults to us, we still don’t see them. But when people with whom we don’t get along point out our faults to us, we have to look at them. We can’t run away anymore. When we’re outrageously angry, burning with jealousy or attachment is eating us away, we can’t deny that we have these negative emotions. Of course, we try to say that it’s the other person’s fault, that we have these horrible emotions only because they made us have them. But after we’ve listened to the Buddha’s teachings, this rationale doesn’t work any more. We know in our hearts that our happiness and suffering come from our own mind. Then, even though we try to blame our difficulties on other people, we know we can’t. We are forced to look at them ourselves. And when we do, we also see that they are incredible opportunities to grow and learn.

The bodhisattvas, who sincerely wish to practise the Dharma, want to have problems. They want

people to criticise them. They want their reputation to get ruined. Why? They see problems as wonderful opportunities to practise. One very good example is Atisha, a great bodhisattva in India who helped spread Buddhism to Tibet in the 11th century. When he went to Tibet, he took his Indian cook with him. This cook was very disagreeable, spoke harshly and was generally rude and obnoxious to people. He even regularly insulted Atisha. The Tibetans asked: “Why did you bring this person with you? We can cook for you. You don’t need him!” But Atisha replied: “I do need him. I need him to practise patience.”

So when someone criticises me I think: “He is an incarnation of Atisha’s cook.” I remember once how when I was living in a Dharma centre, I had big problems with one person there. Let’s call him Sam. I was so happy when I left that place to go back to the monastery and see my spiritual master. My master knew of my difficulties and asked me: “Who is kinder to you: the Buddha or Sam?” I immediately replied, “Of course the Buddha is kinder to me!” My teacher looked disappointed and proceeded to tell me that Sam was actually much kinder to me than the Buddha! Why? I couldn’t possibly practise patience

with the Buddha. I had to practise with Sam, and without practising patience there was no way I could become a Buddha, so I actually needed Sam! Of course, that wasn't what I wanted my teacher to say! I wanted him to say: "Oh, I understand, Sam is a horrible person. He was so mean to you, you poor thing." I wanted sympathy, but my teacher didn't give it to me. This made me wake up and realise that difficult situations are beneficial because they force me to practise and find my inner strength. All of us are going to have problems in our lives. This is the nature of cyclical existence. Remembering this can help us to transform our problems towards the path to enlightenment.

Dharma Practice in Modern Society

This is an important aspect of Buddhism in modern society. Dharma practice isn't just coming to the temple; it's not simply reading a Buddhist scripture or chanting the Buddha's name. Practice is how we live our lives, how we live with our family, how we work together with our colleagues, how we relate to the other people in the country and on the planet.

We need to bring the Buddha's teachings on loving-kindness into our workplace, into our family, even into the grocery store and the gym. We do this not by handing out leaflets on a street corner, but by practising and living the Dharma ourselves. When we do, we will automatically have a positive influence on the people around us. For example, you teach your children loving-kindness, forgiveness and patience not only by telling them, but by showing it in your own behaviour. If you tell your children one thing, but act in the opposite way, they are going to follow what we do, not what we say.

Teaching Children by Example

If we're not careful, it is easy to teach our children to hate and never to forgive when others harm them. Look at the situation in the former Yugoslavia: it is a good example of how, both in the family and in the schools, adults taught children to hate. When those children grew up, they taught their children to hate. Generation after generation, this went on, and look what happened. There is so much suffering there; it's very sad. Sometimes you may teach

children to hate another part of the family. Maybe your grandparents quarrelled with their brothers and sisters, and since then the different sides of the family didn't speak to one another. The cause of the conflict may be something that happened years before you were born — you don't even know what the event was — but because of it, you're not supposed to talk to certain relatives. Then you teach that to your children and grandchildren. They learn that the solution to quarrelling with someone is never to speak to them again. Is that going to help them to be happy and kind people? You should think deeply about this and make sure you teach your children only what is valuable.

This is why it's so important that you exemplify in your behaviour what you want your children to learn. When you find resentment, anger, grudges or belligerence in your heart, you have to work on those, not only for your own inner peace but so you don't teach your children to have those harmful emotions. Because you love your children, try to also love yourself as well. Loving yourself and wanting yourself to be happy means you develop a kind heart for the benefit of everybody in the family.

Bringing Loving-Kindness to the Schools

We need to bring loving-kindness not only into the family but also into the schools. Before I became a nun, I was a teacher, so I have especially strong feelings about this. The most important thing for children to learn is not a lot of information, but how to be kind human beings and how to resolve their conflicts with others in a constructive manner. Parents and teachers put a lot of time and money into teaching children science, maths, literature, geography, geology, and computers. But do we ever spend any time teaching them how to be kind? Do we have any courses on kindness? Do we teach kids how to work with their own negative emotions and how to resolve conflicts with others? I think this is much more vital than the academic subjects. Why? Children may know a lot, but if they grow up to be unkind, resentful or greedy adults, their lives will not be happy.

Parents want their children to have a good future and thus think their children need to make a lot of money. They teach their children academic and technical skills so that they can get a good job and

make lots of money — as if money was the cause of happiness. But when people are on their deathbed, you never hear anybody wistfully says: “I should have spent more time in the office. I should have made more money.” When people have regrets about how they lived their life, usually they regret not communicating better with other people, not being kinder, not letting the people that they care about know that they care. If you want your kids to have a good future don’t just teach them how to make money, but how to live a healthy life, how to be a happy person, and how to contribute to society in a productive way.

Teaching Children to Share with Others

As parents, you have to be role models for your children. Imagine this: let’s say your children come home one day and demand: “Mum and Dad, I want designer jeans, I want new roller blades, I want this and I want that because all the other kids have them.” You say to your children: “Those things won’t make you happy. You don’t need them. It won’t make you happy to keep up with the Lee’s.” But then you

go out and buy all the things that everybody else has, even though your house is already filled with things you don't use. In this case, what you are saying and what you are doing are contradictory. You tell your children to share with other children, but you don't give things to charities for the poor and needy. Look at the homes in this country: they are filled with things we don't use but can't give away. Why not? We're afraid that if we give something away we might need it in the future. We find it difficult to share our things, but we teach children that they should share. A simple way to teach our children generosity is to give away all the things we haven't used in the last year. If all four seasons have gone by and we haven't used something, we probably won't use it the next year either. There are many people who are poor and can use those things, and it would help ourselves, our children, and the other people if we gave those things away.

Another way to teach your children kindness is to refrain from buying everything that you want. Instead, save the money and give it to a charity or to somebody who is in need. You can show your children through your own example that

accumulating more and more material things doesn't bring happiness, and that it's more important to share with others.

Teaching Children About the Environment and Recycling

Similarly, we need to teach children about the environment and recycling. Taking care of the environment that we share with other living beings is part of the practice of loving kindness. If we destroy the environment, we harm others. For example, if we use a lot of disposable things and don't recycle them but just throw them away, what are we giving to our future generations? They will only inherit from us bigger garbage dumps. I'm very happy to see more people reusing and recycling things. It is an important part of our Buddhist practice and an activity that temples and Dharma centres should take the lead in.

The Buddha did not comment directly on many things in our modern society — such as recycling — because those things didn't exist during his time. But he talked about principles that we can apply to

our present situations. These principles can guide us in deciding how to act in many new situations that didn't exist 2,500 years ago.

New Addictions in the Modern Society

However, the Buddha did talk directly about intoxicants and discouraged us from using them. At the time of the Buddha, the chief intoxicant was alcohol. However, extrapolating on the principle he set down, the advice against intoxicants also refers to using recreational drugs or misusing tranquillisers. If we take this a step further, we have to observe our relationship to the biggest intoxicant in our society: television. As a society, we are addicted to TV. For example, after getting home from work, we're tired and want to relax. What do we do? We sit down, switch on the TV, and space out for hours, until we finally fall asleep in front of it. Our precious human life, with its potential to become a fully enlightened Buddha, gets wasted in front of the TV! Sometimes certain TV programmes are far worse intoxicants than alcohol and drugs, such as programmes with a lot of violence. By the time a child is 15-year-old,

he or she has seen thousands of people die on the television. We're intoxicating our children with a violent view of life. Parents need to select the TV programmes they watch with a lot of care, and in that way be an example to their children.

Another big intoxicant is shopping. You may be surprised to hear this, but some psychologists are now researching addiction to shopping. When some people feel depressed, they drink or use drugs. Other people go to the shopping centre and buy something. It's the same mechanism: we avoid looking at our problems and deal with our uncomfortable emotions by external means. Some people are compulsive shoppers. Even when they don't need anything, they go to the mall and just look around. Then buy something, but return home still feeling empty inside.

We also intoxicate ourselves by eating too much or eating too little. In other words, we handle our uncomfortable emotions by using food. I often joke that in America the Three Jewels of Refuge are the TV, the shopping centre, and the refrigerator! That's where we turn to when we need help! But these objects of refuge don't bring us happiness and in fact

make us more confused. If we can turn our mind to the Buddhas, the Dharma and the Sangha, we'll be a lot happier in the long-run. Even in this moment, our spiritual practice can help us. For instance, when we are tired or stressed out, we can relax our mind by chanting the Buddha's name or by bowing to the Buddha. While doing this, visualise that the Buddha is in front of us and imagine that much radiant and peaceful light streams from the Buddha into us. This light fills our entire body-mind and makes us very relaxed and at ease. After doing this for a few minutes, we feel refreshed. This is much cheaper and easier than taking refuge in the TV, shopping mall and refrigerator. Try it!! ☸





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