

## 5. TRANSFORMING OUR MINDS: THE FOUR MIND CHANGING CONTEMPLATIONS AND OTHER PRACTICES

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Today's topic is neither new nor something that is difficult to understand: it is the so-called "four mind changing contemplations." We should daily memorize, as precisely as we can, the words of the Buddha and the Indian and Tibetan scholars so that we can recite them continually in our minds. If we recite them every day, our minds will be transformed. Therefore, I would like to talk a bit about how to do recitations rather than any particular sequence of practice. When we recite the texts repeatedly in our minds, we should not only do it with the assumption, "This is how it is," but we should mean it from the bottom of our hearts and minds. At present, we have habituated our samsaric minds to many kinds of faults. Moreover, our minds do not possess the qualities that are described in the Dharma teachings, so those qualities are what we need to develop. For example, we need to develop loving-kindness and compassion. There are many methods for developing these, but in the beginning, we have to mainly cultivate the mental state of calm abiding (*samatha*). Through such methods we can improve ourselves. It is difficult for beginners, so it is helpful if one starts by studying and contemplating. Then, if one keeps reminding oneself about it again and again, due to the mind's changeable nature, it will definitely be transformed. The Buddha said in a tantra:

The mind will transform according to the amount of modification one applies to it.

## THE FOUR MIND CHANGING CONTEMPLATIONS

Whenever one thinks of those four contemplations, that is, “the difficulty of obtaining the freedoms and advantages,” and so forth, it enables one to direct the mind from its core toward the Dharma.

“The difficulty of obtaining the freedoms and advantages” refers to the fact that a human body is necessary to practice the Dharma. Since it will be difficult to obtain this kind of body again in the future, we have to resolve that we will make full use of the one we have obtained now. We should memorize and recite the following verse from the *Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*<sup>1</sup> starting with:

Relying on the boat that is the human body...

The meaning of this example is that if one needs to reach the other side of a river, it should be done while one has a boat. In the same way, since we have now obtained a human body, we need to try to cross over the ocean of samsara. This is the purport of “the difficulty of obtaining the freedoms and advantages.”

Regarding “death and impermanence” one should contemplate as follows, “I need to practice the sacred Dharma immediately, because unless I do so, there is no certainty that I will be able to practice it later! There is no certainty about the time when I have to die and leave.” It says in the *Guide to a Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*:<sup>2</sup>

Since death will come quickly...

We should memorize this verse and also recite it verbally. The meaning is that since we will die very soon, we need to determine to use all the time we have, from today onwards, for Dharma practice. Later, when we become older and face unfortunate circumstances such as sickness and so forth, it will be too late.

As for “karma, cause and effect,” when we analyze the differences between happiness and suffering, they come about from virtuous and non-virtuous actions, respectively. Thus, we need to practice virtuous actions and abandon non-virtuous ones. It is said in *Instructions to the King*:

Great king, when the time of your death has come,  
 The wealth and retinue you have gathered in this life will not  
     accompany you,  
 The karma that you have accumulated will be like  
 A shadow that follows the body.  
 Wherever you go, your karma will follow.

Contemplating “the disadvantages of samsara” makes us realize the need to accomplish liberation. Regarding the practice of achieving liberation, if we do not give up clinging to samsara, then the wish to accomplish liberation will not take root. We need a reason to give up our clinging to samsara. We need to understand the faults of samsara. But a mere understanding of the faults is not enough—we need to meditate on the faults again and again. Meditating in this way and turning the mind away from the clinging to samsara is the contemplation on “the disadvantages of samsara.” The Buddha said in the *Lalitavistara Sutra*:<sup>3</sup>

Under the influences of existence, craving, and ignorance in  
     samsara,  
 And conditioned by karma, ignorance, and attachment,  
 We spin around endlessly, without pause,  
 As the five types of samsaric beings,  
 Like the spinning of a potter’s turntable.

When the Buddha was asked what faults there are in samsara, he replied that there are two faults. These two are suffering and impermanence. The Buddha taught that suffering is unpleasant sensations. Impermanence refers to the fact that pleasant feelings of happiness are not stable—they constantly change.

Nāgārjuna<sup>4</sup> said:

If your head or clothes were to catch fire...

This means that if our head or clothes were to suddenly catch fire, we would let go of all other activities and strive to put out the fire. Our efforts to put an end to samsara, however, should be even greater than those generated to put out such a fire. Without concern for our body and possessions, we need to strive in abandoning samsara.

## PARTING FROM THE FOUR ATTACHMENTS

Let us now briefly consider the instructions from *Parting from the Four Attachments*. This is a very important teaching. The first line says:

If you cling to this life, you are not a Dharma practitioner.

We need to let go of clinging to this life by recollecting death and impermanence. The Sanskrit term *Dharma* carries the meaning of “keeping” or “holding.” At the very least, the lesser Dharma teaching has to be able to keep us out of the lower realms. The average one keeps us away from rebirth in samsara, and the great Dharma teaching of the Mahayana can keep us away from the extremes of both samsara and nirvana. Therefore, it is taught that whatever teachings we study, contemplate, or meditate on, if it is done out of clinging to this life, it is not the Dharma.

The second line says:

If you cling to the three realms,<sup>5</sup> you do not have the spiritual resolution.<sup>6</sup>

It is taught here that if one practices Dharma with the motivation to obtain a human or a divine body in the next life, then one does not have the spiritual resolution. This is not the path to attain liberation based on the spiritual resolution to leave samsara. Therefore, if we are motivated to practice Dharma for the sake of avoiding a rebirth in the lower realms or in order to be reborn in the higher realms in our next lives, then it is not the path to liberation, but a path to accomplish samsara. Thus, regarding such a motivation, it is said that if one clings to samsara, one does not have the spiritual resolution. However, since we need to accomplish buddhahood, a rebirth in the lower realms is a great obstacle to the accomplishment of buddhahood. Therefore, in order to accomplish that, it is fine to aspire to obtain a body of the higher realms and to practice virtue.

The third line says:

If you cling to your own benefit, you do not have bodhicitta.

In the Mahayana our main aim is to benefit others. If we mostly benefit ourselves, then it is not the Dharma of the Mahayana and it is a mistake. Therefore, we need to engage in a lot of contemplation on the faults of acting for our own sake and the benefits of acting for the sake of others. Furthermore, we need to cultivate loving-kindness, compassion, bodhicitta, and so forth. Since the root of samsara is clinging to the self, as an antidote to this, we need to cultivate the wisdom that realizes the ultimate nature. Alternatively, since the root of samsara is discursive thoughts, we need to cultivate the view in order to abandon them. In this regard, the last line of this teaching says:

If there is grasping, it is not the view.

The “view” is the mind that realizes what the ultimate nature is. Since this ultimate nature does not exist as anything whatsoever, we need to have no grasping at all. For example, if we were to think that “this is emptiness,” then this would not be the view. It would be grasping. It is taught that the view must be free of grasping toward anything whatsoever.

When the practice of the *Parting from the Four Attachments* is well-established in our minds, our minds are able to be transformed to some extent. If we, on top of that, engage in the tantric practices of recitations and other virtuous activities, these will become authentic practices.

## THE FOUR IMMEASURABLES

It is also important to remember the “Four Immeasurables.” According to Atiśa’s tradition, we first contemplate that all sentient beings have been our mothers in past lives. We then contemplate their great kindness and the need to repay their kindness. With this in mind we recite: “May all sentient beings have happiness and the causes of happiness!” Here, “happiness” includes the temporary happiness of the higher realms that is without problems and the happiness that does not contradict the Dharma, up until the ultimate happiness of the attainment of buddhahood. Loving-kindness is the motivation to practice virtue, the cause of happiness of self and others. Recite the following about three times: “May all sentient beings have the causes of happiness,” bringing this wish to your mind.

The second is immeasurable compassion. Think of the sufferings of the lower realms and the higher realms. The causes for suffering are non-virtue, afflictions, and the clinging to a self. With this in mind, we make the wish: “May all be free from those sufferings and their causes!”

The third is immeasurable joy. Here, we make the wish: “May all be free from suffering, have happiness, and not be separated from that happiness!”

The fourth is equanimity toward all sentient beings—instead of having attachment to some and aversion to others. We make the wish: “May all sentient beings, who have been our mothers in past lives, gain an equanimous state of mind!”

These four practices are termed “immeasurable” because when you meditate on them even once, an immeasurable amount of merit is accumulated. For example, one contemplation on loving-kindness will accumulate an immeasurable amount of merit. We will end up gaining a vaster amount of merit through these contemplations than by practicing extensive generosity and making great offerings.

Among the four immeasurables, compassion is especially important at all times. It is taught that great compassion is the foremost driving factor among all the Mahayana Dharma teachings. To cultivate it, we should contemplate in the following way:

No sentient being has genuine freedom. We are at the mercy of our minds, which in turn are overwhelmed by the afflictions. Being under the power of afflictions, all sentient beings have no choice but to experience suffering.<sup>7</sup> We are oppressed by suffering, and we have no real independence whatsoever. How sad it is that all are oppressed by suffering and afflictions! How sad that all sentient beings have to inevitably experience all kinds of unbearable sufferings against their will!

Because sentient beings have already accumulated the causes and conditions, they have to experience the sufferings of the hot and cold hells. And this happens not only once; they will have to experience them repeatedly an immeasurable number of times. How terrible! Hungry ghosts will have to experience the sufferings of hunger and thirst an immeasurable number of times. How pitiful! Animals have to experience the sufferings of eating each other an immeasurable number of times. How awful! Humans also have to experience the sufferings of birth,

sickness, death, and so forth, not only once, but an immeasurable number of times. How sad! Some gods experience severe suffering at the time of death. Because all gods must be reborn in the three lower realms when they die and move on to the next life. How pitiful indeed!

Since all sentient beings have to stay in samsara for a long time, it is taught that if one were to gather all the blood that others have drawn from one's own body, and all the tears one has cried, there would be an ocean's worth. If one were to gather the flesh and bones from all the bodies one has had, it would equal a mountain. Think of how pitiful it is for these sentient beings who are suffering like this! In order to abandon samsara, we need to practice the Dharma that the Buddha taught. It is difficult to come into contact with this Dharma that the Buddha taught; and even if we have the fortune to do so, we are under the power of the afflictions. How terribly sad this is!

When the Buddha asked Avalokiteśvara: "How do you practice compassion toward sentient beings?" he replied: "I cultivate compassion by thinking, 'These sentient beings of the higher realms are gathering the causes of suffering, and those sentient beings of the lower realms are experiencing the resultant sufferings. There is no happiness no matter where one is born within these three realms of samsara.'<sup>87</sup>"

Dragpa Gyaltsen said that if one has the conviction that no matter where one is born within the higher or lower realms, there is no well-being and happiness, then one will be able to practice the Dharma. Contemplate that no matter which sentient beings you see, whether they are born in high or low status, in the east, south, and so forth, none of them are well and happy. Cultivate compassion in this way!

In short, when you look at sentient beings, no matter how strong they might appear to be, you should have compassion for them, because they are in fact in a most miserable state, tormented as they are by suffering!

However, this is a general form of contemplating compassion. The Mahayana compassion is not a mere contemplation of compassion, instead one must have the following motivation: "Although all sentient beings need happiness, they are not happy. Therefore, I will be responsible for all sentient beings' happiness and causes of happiness! I will be responsible for freeing them all from suffering and the causes of suffering!"

## BODHICITTA

Concerning the explanation of bodhicitta, we might wonder how the objectives mentioned above can be achieved. They can be accomplished if we can attain the state of buddhahood. The actual objective is for all sentient beings to be happy and free from suffering. The instrument to achieve this objective is bodhicitta, which is the wish, “I need to attain the state of buddhahood for their sake!” Whether we engage in an activity or not, we must always keep in mind a certain objective, and it can be none other than the following four: 1) well-being in this life, 2) well-being in the next life, 3) attaining the state of arhatship, or 4) attaining the state of buddhahood. Among these, none other than the peerless state of buddhahood can accomplish the benefits of both oneself and others.

Therefore, we need to wish, “I absolutely must accomplish buddhahood.” This wish is not a motivation to attain buddhahood for one’s own sake, but rather a resolve to attain buddhahood for the sake of other sentient beings—this is the “aspiring bodhicitta.” The intention, “I must accumulate virtue in order to attain buddhahood,” is the “engaging bodhicitta.” Both these types of bodhicitta are important. For example, even if one had not accumulated more than a single virtuous action, that single deed becomes a Dharma activity of the Mahayana if it is imbued with bodhicitta. Therefore, if one has planted a powerful habitual imprint of the Mahayana Dharma in one’s mind, it is a hundred percent certain that one will sooner or later achieve buddhahood.

Furthermore, it is not enough just to generate bodhicitta; we also need the bodhicitta vows. Those who have never received these vows need to take them in front of their root guru. If one does not have a guru, it is permissible to take the vows in front of a Buddha statue, while thinking that the statue is the Buddha, that he is bestowing the vows, and that we are repeating the ceremonial words after him. Generate bodhicitta while thinking: “Just as the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the past have generated bodhicitta, I shall likewise do so!” If we recite this three times, resolving that we will put it into practice, we obtain the vows.

For the practice of bodhicitta, there are the two meditations of “equalizing oneself and others” and “exchanging oneself with others.” Firstly, when meditating on equalizing oneself and others, contemplate that we ourselves and all other sentient beings are equal in wishing to achieve happiness and to be free of suffering. This is the practice of

equalizing oneself and others. The practice of exchanging oneself and others is the contemplation that we give both our happiness and our virtues to all other sentient beings and take the sufferings and non-virtues of all sentient beings upon ourselves.

The following words can be recited in conjunction with our practice of loving-kindness, compassion and bodhicitta:

I shall generate bodhicitta!  
 In order to fully benefit myself and others—  
 I shall generate bodhicitta!

If we repeat these words, take them to heart, and accumulate a few hundred thousand of them, then our minds will definitely transform. It is beneficial to practice in this way. In particular, the practice of exchanging oneself with others is the ultimate practice of the Mahayana. If we do not practice exchanging oneself with others, we will neither gain genuine temporary happiness, nor attain the ultimate state of buddhahood. Therefore, we must put particular emphasis on this practice in our meditation.

To cherish oneself is to ignore others and consider oneself as the most important. To cherish others is to ignore oneself and consider other sentient beings as more significant. In order to practice this, contemplate over and over again the need to abandon self-cherishing and adopt the practice of cherishing others. Moreover, this contemplation needs to be based on logical reasoning. How does this work? In this practice, contemplate repeatedly that you are less important and that others are superior. To understand why this is the case, contemplate that all faults and problems come from self-cherishing, and how all positive qualities come from benefitting others. The thought, “I need to work for my own benefit” is the very cause of suffering; and the mindset, “I need to work for the benefit of other sentient beings” is the very cause of happiness. Śāntideva said, “The mindset ‘I need to work for my own benefit’ is a demonic mentality, whereas thinking of how to benefit others is divine spirituality.”

We need to contemplate that if we work for our own sake, we will continue to wander in samsara, but if we work for the sake of others we shall attain the state of buddhahood. This is the vital point in the cultivation of bodhicitta. Therefore, when we cultivate the actual

bodhicitta, we should recite the following verse five times, one hundred times, or more:

How sad to see sentient beings in this pitiful state!  
 May the sufferings of all mother sentient beings ripen on me!

Contemplate, “May the sufferings of sentient beings throughout endless space, who have all been my mothers in past lives, ripen on me!” and benefit them as much as possible.

Then think, “I give all my happiness and virtues to others with the wish that they will be happy!” Repeat this fifty times, one hundred times, or more, as much as you are able. Continuously contemplate, “From now on I will give my body and wealth, and all the virtues I accumulate throughout the three times to all sentient beings! Even when I just accumulate a single virtue, may it be of benefit to all sentient beings later!” This should include not only ordinary worldly people like ourselves, but in particular those who are engaged in serious non-virtuous deeds, as it is often the case with powerful politicians and so forth. Such individuals certainly have to go to the lower realms after death. It is with these beings in mind that we formulate the wish, “May it be of benefit to all those beings! May it be the cause for all sentient beings to be temporarily free from suffering and ultimately attain the state of buddhahood!”

It is stated in a sutra:

May this Dharma that I know and this virtue, without  
 exception become the cause that sustains all sentient beings,  
 and the cause of their benefits!

In short, we need to think, “May all my knowledge and whatever virtue I accumulate be of benefit to all sentient beings.”

## DEALING WITH DIFFICULT EMOTIONS

I would like to add another point. Regarding our regular mindset, when we are angry, it harms ourselves as well as others, so it is an action that ruins both self and others. If we cultivate patience, it will benefit both oneself and others. Therefore, it is an action that benefits both self and others. If we cultivate it again and again and try to remember it when we

become angry, it would be very beneficial. Our teacher the Buddha said, “Even if someone were to kill me, I will not express dislike with my body, I will not utter words of dislike, and I will also never engage in non-virtuous thoughts.”

If somebody were to steal all our possessions, what should we be thinking at that time? It is said in a sutra that we should think, “I have given them away, may this be my donation.” In short, it is taught that we should be thinking that we are practicing generosity. Then, if somebody is using our possessions, what should we be thinking at that time? Think, “May they be of benefit!”

The *Guide to a Bodhisattva's Way of Life* says that when one realizes that one is about to die, one discriminates between enemies and friends. Wanting to harm the enemies, one gets angry, and wanting to benefit one's friends, one gets attached, and so on. Thus, one accumulates many faults. However, the fact is that everyone is going to die including both enemies and friends. For this reason, one should contemplate that it is not sensible to have attachment or aversion toward sentient beings.

In any case, one should not hold some beings close and keep others at a distance. This is especially important in the Mahayana. It is taught that one needs to avoid attachment and aversion by not discriminating others as being close or distant to us.

At all times, we should accumulate as much merit as we can toward the guru and the Three Jewels, especially the representations of the Three Jewels, and avoid unwholesome actions to the best of our abilities. Likewise, we should help other sentient beings to do the same.

Do not make sentient beings the objects of your desire, aversion, ignorance, pride, and other afflictions. Instead, they should become the objects of our virtues such as compassion, loving-kindness, bodhicitta, and so on. The Buddha is like a field where faith and so forth can be cultivated, and likewise sentient beings are the fields for the cultivation of loving-kindness, compassion, and so forth. Therefore, we need to think of both as the foundations for the accumulation of merit.

It is taught in a sutra that if one wants to attain buddhahood, there is one single Dharma practice that is indispensable. Which one is that? It is the cultivation of an attitude of equanimity toward all sentient beings. We develop this attitude of equanimity by cultivating the wish to benefit all sentient beings without discriminating between high, low, good or bad, and so forth. We resolve that we will not get angry at any sentient

being, and that we will not discriminate between beings, thinking of some as close and others as distant.

In the tradition of the Mahayana, the actual practice to be undertaken is the six perfections (*pāramitā*). We should try to practice these amongst each other as much as we can. Then we need to make aspiration prayers and give our body, wealth, and all the virtues that we accumulate throughout the three times to all sentient beings. We make the resolve that from now on we must avoid committing any transgressions in our ethical discipline; no matter what harms we face we will cultivate patience; we will train in all kinds of meditative concentration; and we will develop all forms of wisdom. This is how we should make aspiration prayers suffused with bodhicitta for all these activities. One sutra summarizes the purpose of the six perfections. This is important, and it would be good to memorize these words:

Why do we need to practice the six perfections? Practicing the six perfections allows one to subdue their corresponding opposing factors. For example, stinginess is overcome by the practice of generosity, and so on. Ultimately, one needs to attain the state of perfect buddhahood. Temporarily, they benefit both self and others, and one will experience inexhaustible pleasurable karmic results in all future lives.

Finally, it is important to dedicate one's virtues. If they are not properly dedicated, and we happen to get angry later on, our virtues are destroyed. Similarly, we might practice the virtue of generosity, but either regret it and think that we were too generous, or think, "I have done well" and become proud. In both cases, the merit is lost. Such lapses happen, but if we dedicate our merit with the motivation to attain the state of buddhahood in order to benefit all sentient beings, then these lapses will not be able to destroy the virtues, and they will become the path of the Mahayana. It is furthermore taught that we need to make as many dedications as we can and that they should be of the best possible quality. If we make these abundant dedications, then our virtues will become the causes and conditions for the accomplishment of the highest results. Dedications are therefore important.

If you can remember to do the practices described above daily, without attachment to the results, then your mind will definitely change and

improve. This is my hope. I have not been able to speak a lot today, but whatever I said was to the best of my ability. Therefore, some of you do understand these teachings. Those who do not should always think positively about the Dharma and have no doubts as to what it is truly about.

*Translated by Solvej Hyeled Nielsen.*

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1. Chapter 7, verse 14. The whole verse reads: Relying on the boat that is the human body, cross over the great river of suffering! Since it is difficult to find this boat again in the future, oh fool, do not spend your time in sleep.
2. Chapter 7, verse 7. The whole verse reads: Since death will come quickly, until then gather the accumulations [of merit and wisdom]! Even if you abandon laziness at that time, it will be too late, so what would you do?
3. Derge Kangyur vol. 46, p. 88a2.
4. *Letter to a Friend*, v. 104. The whole verse reads: If your head or clothes were to catch fire, do not pause to extinguish it! Rather, exert effort to stop future rebirth. There is no purpose superior to this.
5. The three realms are the desire realm, the form realm, and the formless realm.
6. The Tibetan term (*nges 'byung*) that is here translated as “spiritual resolution,” is generally translated as “renunciation,” but the meaning is the determination to achieve liberation from samsara.
7. This means that all sentient beings always experience the three kinds of suffering (i.e., the suffering of suffering, the suffering of change, and the all-pervasive suffering of compoundedness).
8. In samsara, there is no true or genuine happiness that is uncontaminated by mental afflictions.

## 6. RECOLLECTING THE THREE JEWELS

1. The Tibetan term *mdo* means “to abbreviate” or “bring together”.
2. Vajrayāna deity recitation practices.

## 7. THE SEVEN-BRANCH PRACTICE BASED ON SAMANTABHADRA'S ASPIRATION FOR EXCELLENT CONDUCT

1. Words and phrases which have been quoted from the text are left in bold. This is intended to make it easy for the reader to distinguish between commentary and quote.
2. The hands, the knees, and the head.
3. This generally refers to the accumulations of merit and wisdom through which enlightenment is attained.
4. The stupa represents the mind of the Buddha.
5. The cardinal and intermediate directions along with above and below.
6. The Tibetan word for buddha is “sang-gyé” (*sangs rgyas*), which literally means “purified [and] developed.”