

The Essential Elements of Buddhist Practice

Generally speaking, whatever we say, study, or practice in Buddhism is a method to bring harmony and peace into our minds. No matter what angle you study them from, that is the effect of the teachings. There are many different methods and explanations on how we can approach the goal, but they all approach the same goal. This is because understanding and training the mind is the principal subject that we work with.

Yet, the mind is a very hidden subject that is difficult to see and difficult to know. It has no form, color, or shape; there is nothing we can grasp or hold. It is something like putting your hand in water – you feel something, but when you close your hand you get nothing. Mind is like that.

We are taken by the power of our habitual tendencies. Even if we know what to do, even if we know how to follow the path, sometimes the mind does not allow us to go in that direction. It takes us to the wrong place without choice. Therefore, mental training becomes very important.

As we know, the mind is the foundation of everything of both samsara or nirvana. Samsara is the creation of mind and nirvana is the creation of mind. The basic reality of the mind is pure. But when we fail to recognize that purity, the sense faculties become involved with objects: the eye sees something; the ear hears something; the nose smells something, and the mouth tastes something. Consciousness becomes attached to those sense objects and the afflicting emotions of the mind, the “I,” results. If something is good, we like it and feel some kind of happiness and want to get more. When we don’t like something, we react negatively and try to get rid of it. This is all interdependence. This is the state of samsara.

All of this, every bit, is a manifestation of emptiness. Emptiness gives manifestation to all faculties and conditions. However, we fail to recognize them as such and attempt to maintain them by keeping them in the mind. Even if we sometimes recognize them as being manifestations of emptiness, our habitual tendencies don’t allow us to maintain that state.

So now, enlightenment is when we purely see that nature, see what it is, maintain that state, and carry the path within emptiness. Emptiness also manifests this clarity and good qualities. All of these things, whatever is manifested from emptiness, does not exist inherently. The enlightened state is realizing that the nature of all is emptiness. From that emptiness, everything manifests. Phenomena come and go. Do not attach to them or reject them – just accept them for what they are without involving anger or attachment.

This is why the study of illusory body becomes necessary. We do not turn phenomena into the illusion, rather, we recognize how everything appears as an illusion. Everything comes and goes. On the other hand, in samsara, when we see these things we grasp them and consider them real. When we like something we attach to it, grasp it, and crave it. When we don’t like something, we fight it and suffering results. We go back and forth, and fear comes from that. This process is also interdependent.

All virtue has a base, a foundation. Nonvirtue has no base or foundation. So if we exert effort, we will have a very good foundation to realize the illusory reality of all phenomena. Samsara has no ground. It is confused. When there is no confusion, there is no samsara. That is the reality of all phenomena.

The earth is based in space; without space this earth cannot exist. This earth manifests from space. This understanding is basic to our study, we have to know about it. It is the mode of existence of all phenomena. As I have often said, no matter from which angle we study, everything is in that mode of abiding, a manifestation of emptiness and space.

Whatever is constituted is the background, the foundation. The final foundation is the view that the mind is limitless. There can be no end to knowledge. However much we study and read – even hundreds of books – there is still more to know and understand. That shows that the mind is limitless. If mind were limited, after some time then we would not be able to know more, there would not be any space to know more. Yet, as I mentioned, our mind consistently leads us back to our old path, the samsaric state. This subject is the general idea of the study and practice of Buddhist philosophy. This is the reason we put our time and energy into this subject.

We are confused because of our ignorance. Through that ignorance, we become attached. Through that attachment, fear arises. And we supposedly do all these things to achieve peace and happiness! In samsara, the more happiness and joy we have, the more suffering arises. For example, when you have a new house, you may need a special security system because you fear that someone will break in. We have home insurance, car insurance, all kinds of insurance because we have fear. First we attach to something and then become fearful of losing it. Eventually, there is no final protection. When the time comes, we have to go through death and loss. There is no protection. No matter how you are protected, even with nine iron walls, still you are not really safe. When the time comes, the walls will crash. It is like a child's game. Basically, we are all like that – those who are protecting us are themselves not protected.

These problems all come from the primary base of ignorance. Through that ignorance, we see things as real. From that comes the reaction of liking or disliking. What we like we become attached to, so we crave and grasp it. When obstacles come, the reaction of dislike arises. To protect ourselves from that object of aversion, we make all that insurance. But it only brings suffering, a deep, profound suffering from which it is difficult to escape.

Buddhism is the study of the mind, the practice of the mind, and the cultivation of the mind to attain enlightenment. It is a method to directly realize the limitless nature of mind which pervades the whole universe. In the bodhisattva's path, there are many ways to train in this, many practices.

First is equalizing oneself and others. We need to meditate on this: I and all sentient beings are not different. Everyone who likes peace and happiness is equal. Everyone who doesn't like suffering is equal. We are not different whether we can communicate or not, whether we are scholars or not.

Some people are very selfish, but they want peace and happiness. It is because they want peace and happiness that they become selfish. Through selfishness they hope to have more peace. So do wise people. Bodhisattvas sacrifice all for other people, but they also are working to establish peace and happiness. We all basically wish to establish peace and happiness. Whether we are working with the based in the correct way or the wrong way, our intention is to attain peace and happiness. This is equalizing practice. We need to keep it in mind.

Sometimes, we can help other people; sometimes we cannot help them. Regardless of whether we can help or not, they want peace and happiness. We don't know whether they will get it. As I mentioned, sometimes different experiences present us with a special method to awaken the mind. Sometimes they show us what is not the right way and indicate that we should try a different way.

First, open your mind and heart to all other beings and establish the universal mind through the equalizing practice. There is no particular special "universal mind" but doing this is called establishing the universal mind. In other words, recognize that the quality of our mind is limitless and that it can reach all sentient beings. Recollect that and meditate on it.

Second is the practice of exchanging oneself and others. This practice reduces our pride and jealousy. We may think, “I am a special person” and there may be some cause for pride because of our qualities, education, wealth, or for many other reasons. But because of that pride, we may become jealous of a person’s good qualities if they become better than or equal to us. At that time, we exchange ourselves and the other.

Having pride will not bring peace or happiness. Put that person in your place. Place that person in your mind and meditate how you feel about your good qualities and how it feels to be proud and happy. The other person feels the same way about having good qualities or happiness. So what’s the difference? This is called “walking in someone else’s shoes,” isn’t it?

When someone else has peace, happiness, or virtuous qualities, rejoice. Rejoicing is a very special practice. You don’t have to do anything, just rejoice and you will receive great benefit in this life, but much more in the future.

Exchanging is a very important practice. It reduces fear and attachment. These two are very close cronies of ignorance and they manipulate all our suffering. They are very close to each other as well. Through the practice of exchanging, they are reduced and become powerless. This practice brings peace and harmony in our own minds and even in our families. In the family, when there is an arrogant person, he can destroy all the peace in that family and get everyone agitated. When we all are considerate and respectful of others, peace and harmony will naturally be present.

Through this Dharma instruction, we can gain more understanding of how to bring about peace and happiness. Whether you are in a family or another group, you may exchange your good place and things and share them with others by taking their difficulties. Others will respect you more, even if you don’t need or want the respect. People will rely on you and trust you more. Is this not a universal law?

Third is the practice of cherishing others more than yourself. This is, of course, more difficult but we should practice it anyway. Take the point of view of the majority. You are one person. Sacrificing the majority for one person is not right because it brings suffering to many. Sacrificing oneself for others, the majority, is right because it brings peace and happiness. This practice is often mentioned in the *Bodhicaryavatara*. You, the embodiment of ego, are put on one side and all other sentient beings are put on the other side. Which is more important?

When we investigate carefully in this way, it is very obvious that all sentient beings are more important. Sacrificing sentient beings for one person is not right. This person who is the embodiment of ego, ignorance, and pride is subject to be sacrificed for the benefit of all sentient beings.

The body is the basis of all suffering. Because of that, we meditate in these ways to transform and uproot ignorance and confusion – the root cause of all suffering.

*The introduction to a Chöd teaching by Khenchen Konchog Gyaltsen Rinpoche,
given in January, 1993 at the Tibetan Meditation Center in Frederick, MD.
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