

## The Buddhist Path

Generally speaking, all sentient beings inherently wish to experience peace and happiness and to gain freedom from suffering and unfavorable conditions. However, they must be able to recognize these things for what they are. Human life has the quality of intelligence. In fact, it brings with it every opportunity to gain freedom from all suffering and to accomplish full enlightenment. We should recognize the truth of this for ourselves and cultivate the confidence that we, too, can use this precious human life as a ship to cross the ocean of samsara.

The appearance of a buddha in this world is rare. The taking of an interest in the Dharma is also rare. It is rare to obtain the precious human rebirth and to enjoy good health, and it is rare to find an opportunity to practice. If we do not make use of these circumstances now when we have them, how can we hope to ever find them again?

Although this precious human body is difficult to find and possesses all excellent qualities, it is impermanent. All composite phenomena are transitory, and this is particularly true of our human life. All the great enlightened masters and powerful rulers of nations who have ever lived have vanished without a trace. No matter how important we are to our family or society, no matter how much is left for us to learn or do, when the time comes, we will have to face our death. Therefore, we should follow the example of Milarepa, who said:

Out of fear of death, I escaped to the mountains.  
Because of the uncertainty of the time of death,  
I persistently practiced the Dharma.  
I captured the fortress of the unchanging nature of mind.  
Now I am free from the fear of death.

Since the sole purpose of our practice and study of Dharma is to bring peace – both for ourselves and for others – in this life and in our future lives, we should observe the changing of the seasons, the change of day to night, and apply ourselves to practice in every moment.

All sentient beings exist from moment to moment in a state of suffering. Many, especially in the three lower realms, experience the suffering of physical and mental pain. Others, in more fortunate circumstances, experience the suffering of change when their temporary happiness and enjoyment give way to sorrow. Friends may become enemies. Food may turn to poison. We are disappointed when we don't get what we want, and we helplessly meet with what we would like to avoid.

These various sufferings are nothing more than the results that arise from our own nonvirtuous actions and thoughts, and so it is useless to struggle against them. In fact, we can learn to approach our suffering in a positive way. Suffering can remind us to be aware of our ongoing accumulations of causes and their inevitable effects, which we alone will have to experience. Suffering also undermines our arrogance, brings us down to earth, and inspires us to look for solutions. Because of our suffering, we can better understand others who are in pain. And when we become convinced of the inexorable quality of karmic causation, we will be effective and sincere in our responsibility for ourselves and others.

Since all sentient beings exist within this state of suffering, it can be helpful to see them as our parents, friends, or children and to cultivate the same loving-kindness and compassion toward them that we experience toward our loved ones. Compassion, in particular, is one of the principal antidotes to the afflicting emotions, especially anger and resentment. It extends itself to all beings, wishing to free them from their suffering, and brings with it a deep sense of space and relaxation. Those who possess compassion become attractive to others and are respected by everyone. Compassion opens our hearts.

When we have some experience of this genuine loving-kindness and compassion, we can begin to cultivate bodhicitta, the mind that wishes to achieve buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. As the best path to the purification of the afflicting emotions and subtle obscurations and to the perfection of wisdom awareness, bodhicitta is the ultimate source of all benefit, peace, and happiness. Bodhicitta is the universal mind that embraces every sentient being from the heart. Mental activity, confidence, and courage – all these excellent qualities and others arise from the practice of bodhicitta.

There are two kinds of bodhicitta: that concerned with aspiration and that concerned with activity. The bodhicitta of aspiration is the altruistic thought to attain buddhahood for the benefit of others. This can be compared with the wish to go to a certain place. The bodhicitta of activity puts the bodhicitta of aspiration into effect, in the same way that one would prepare for and then set out on a journey. This includes all practices and study undertaken to train the mind, including the disciplines of the six paramitas.

The first of these paramitas, generosity, cuts through our selfishness. The second, morality and ethics, disciplines our body, speech, and mind so that we can avoid negative actions and cultivate virtue. The third, patience, helps us to attain fearlessness and confidence. The fourth, perseverance, channels the energy and strength we need to gather the two accumulations of merit and wisdom. The fifth, meditative concentration, is the method of abiding in one-pointed calm, free from distractions and mental obscurations. The sixth, wisdom awareness, penetrates the all-pervading nature of mind and dispels all delusions; this is the special insight that transcends the duality of grasping and fixation.

Bodhicitta is the backbone of the Buddhadharma. Without it, there is no way to attain buddhahood or to benefit countless numbers of beings; yet, if one possesses bodhicitta, one helplessly becomes a buddha. Lord Jigten Sumgön said, “the cultivation of bodhicitta is thus one of the best methods to free [ourselves] from all outer and inner obstacles and hindrances, both in our ordinary lives and on the path to enlightenment. Bodhicitta is the supreme wheel of protection.”

Those who have this foundation of training in the causal vehicle and who have a good understanding of the general teachings of the Buddha can begin the practice of tantra. The word tantra itself means “continuity” and refers to the continuity of the unchanging nature of enlightened mind, the buddha-nature. The practice of tantra is a powerful and direct method to awaken this luminous nature of mind. Especially through the ceremony of the four empowerments, one receives the potential to purify one’s ordinary body and manifest the body of a deity, to purify ordinary speech and manifest wisdom speech, to purify the obscurations of mind and realize the wisdom mind, and to purify the obscurations of duality and recognize the all-pervading nature of enlightenment. The Six Yogas of Naropa, that is, the practices of *tummo*, clear light, dream yoga, the illusory body, phowa, and bardo, contain the very essence of all the teachings of tantra. The proper accomplishment of these methods cuts through all samsaric delusion and allows the enlightened mind to manifest directly.

In order to study and practice this magnificent path – in order to be free from samsara and attain enlightenment – it is essential to have a fully qualified teacher. For example, if one were to try to cross the ocean in a ship with no captain, one would have no hope at all of reaching the opposite shore. In the same way, one needs a qualified teacher to lead one safely to one’s goal, especially on the path of tantra. When teachers themselves are confused, though, they will not be able to properly guide their students. One may practice guru yoga, seeing one’s lama as the four kayas of a buddha, but this is not just guru worship. Rather, it is the way to awaken the mind and receive the full blessings of enlightenment. Lord Jigten Sumgön said:

I, a yogin, realized the unity of guru, my own mind, and the Buddha.

I have no need of superficial devotion.  
In non-effort, I, the yogin, am happy.  
This happy yogin experiences joy.  
This experience of joy is the guru's kindness.

Enlightenment is the all-pervading wisdom of emptiness, the unity of non-objectified great compassion and intrinsic awareness. All of samsara and nirvana is “sealed” (*mudra*) by this nature, and there is nothing “greater” (*maha*) than this. Therefore, it is called mahamudra. When one realizes this nature, it is called nirvana. When one fails to realize this, one wanders in samsara. Nagarjuna said, “There is no difference between samsara and nirvana. When one realizes the nature of samsara, that is called the attainment of nirvana.”

In order to practice mahamudra, one should first make effort to practice calm-abiding meditation through the method of watching the breath. First, sit in a comfortable seat and relax your mind. Then take a deep, full breath and exhale, expelling all tension. Then breathe naturally through your nostrils and, taking your breath as your object, rest your mind. When your mind wanders, simply bring it back to an awareness of the breath. In this way, tame your mind and stabilize it in one-pointed calm. Alternatively, visualize a blue-colored light at your heart center, about the size of a mustard seed and, taking that as your object, rest your mind. When thoughts arise, without chasing after them or pushing them away, let them dissolve into the blue light and let them rest.

This training dispels confusion and establishes the mind in clarity and peace, and on the basis of this stability – and through pointing-out instructions – one realizes mahamudra, the all-pervading nature of the mind. At that time, all gross afflicting emotions are seen to be the nature of emptiness. Then, there is nothing to accept and nothing to reject. Simply be aware of this unfabricated experience of things as they are. In the same way that space is primordially free from clouds, this nature is inexpressible in its vastness and profundity. This is what it is like when the mind is free from conceptual thoughts. This is total freedom.

Dedication is the method to fully establish the fruit of whatever practice one has done. One may have accumulated a great deal of merit, but if it has not been dedicated, its result may be wasted before it manifests. One's own virtue and the virtue of others in the past, present, and future – along with the inherent virtue of buddha-nature itself, which is possessed by everyone – should be dedicated to the attainment of complete enlightenment for oneself and all sentient beings. This method of dedication not only increases virtue's result, but, like a drop of water merging with the ocean, that virtue becomes inexhaustible until one attains complete buddhahood. It is very important for every practitioner to attend to this simple yet effective method.

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