

Peace and Impermanence

A Teaching by His Holiness the Sakya Trizin



The world in which we live today is complicated and turbulent, and if we are to live well in it, we need to find a way to tackle the problems that afflict it. There are many different systems, philosophies and religions that attempt to solve these problems, and they all share one basic belief: that everyone wishes to be free from suffering and everyone wishes to be happy. It seems to me that the Buddhadharmā is a very effective way to attain these goals.

Most of our efforts are dedicated to the pursuit of happiness. In this endeavour, we have made tremendous progress in the fields of science and technology; and due to this progress, we have been able to solve many issues and to greatly benefit mankind.

But although valuable, this material progress cannot bring us true peace and happiness. If we are to find true peace and happiness, it is absolutely essential

that we achieve inner spiritual progress. In order to do so, we need to study the Buddhadharmā, follow its advice and put it into action in our daily life.

It is my belief that the basic principles of the world's major religions are similar in their essence, although each religion has its own ways of expressing them and methods of applying them. As I am a Buddhist, it is according to the Lord Buddha's teachings that I will try to explain how spiritual life can bring us genuine peace and happiness. The Buddha's teachings are based principally on the fact that every living being, not only human beings but every living being, possesses Buddha nature.

Buddha nature means that the true nature of our mind is pure, right from the beginning, and has been since beginningless time. It is not itself stained by obscurations, but it is completely covered by them and so we cannot see it. But by practising the spiritual

path, we can discover its nature.

Buddha nature is like a seed that we have inside us that, if allowed to grow, will ripen into enlightenment. The main reason why we can reach enlightenment is that we have this seed inside us. If we didn't have it, then there would be no possibility of attaining enlightenment.

This seed has actually been inside us right from the beginning. But until now, we haven't met with the right conditions for it to grow. For a normal seed to grow, we need to create the right conditions, such as placing it in fertile soil with the right amount of moisture, the right temperature, and so forth. Similarly, in order to allow the seed of our Buddha nature to grow, we must create the right conditions. Without the right conditions, it will not grow.

Although every living being has Buddha nature, human beings have the most potential to discover it. Because human life offers the best foundation to practise the Dharma, the teachings say that it is paramount to obtain the precious human birth, especially one that is free from all unfavourable conditions.

A human life that is endowed with all the favourable conditions is in fact very difficult to obtain. But by the same token, it is of enormous benefit, as it can be a vehicle to Enlightenment. So when we have obtained this precious human life and with it the opportunity to become enlightened, it is crucial that we fully realise its potential, and that we make optimal use of it. There is no greater loss than that of missing the opportunity for enlightenment that human life brings us. So the first important thing to do is to realise how precious human life this. Once we fully realise this, then we cannot remain without striving to make the best of it.

The second thing we need to do is to ponder on impermanence and death. The Lord Buddha said that everything that is created by causes and conditions is

impermanent. This applies in particular to human life. We have no possibility of knowing how long our life will be. Our only certainty is that one day we will die. Furthermore, death could occur at any moment.

There are many, many causes that can shorten our life. Just as a breeze can extinguish a lamp in a single moment, even though it has enough oil to burn for many more hours, in the same way our lives can suddenly be cut short by unexpected circumstances, even if we are strong and healthy.

Every single moment that we live is deducted from our lifespan and there is nothing more that we can add to it. Something that is constantly being depleted while not being replenished is bound to run out. Through the centuries there have been many great spiritual masters, as well as many great historical figures, and great historical moments, but today they are all gone. People can read about them and remember them, but not one of them is still in existence.

Similarly today, we are all leading our normal lives, but the time will come when all of us will also become history. And so it is very important that we make the most of this life. Impermanence is actually a great thing, because if we realise impermanence, we naturally lose our attachment to ordinary things and we enter the spiritual path. If we have already entered it, meditating on impermanence will speed up our practice, and if we are already at an advanced level, it will help us to realise ultimate truth.

Lord Buddha said that anyone who thinks about impermanence is making an offering to the Buddha. One who can think about impermanence is one who has received the prophecy of the Buddha.

As ordinary persons, we have many perceptions, but the best perception we can have is that of impermanence. Through remembering impermanence, we can be released from all forms of suffering. The main source of our suffering is attachment, and by

remembering impermanence, we lose this attachment and become free from suffering.

The life we are living now is short, and so we have to make the best of it. Just to pass through this life in an ordinary way, even animals can do. But we human beings are blessed with intelligence and wisdom, and so we must do all we can to get the most out of this precious human life. The best way to do this is to practise the spiritual path.

If we are to embark on the spiritual path, we must begin by pondering on the difficulty of obtaining a precious human birth, and on impermanence and death. This is the best way to get rid of our attachment to this life.

Although this life is important, it is only temporary. Very few people can live beyond a hundred years. So even at its longest, a human life can last little more than a hundred years. And when our time comes, when we leave this world, no matter how many possessions we have, how much wealth and power we have, no matter how talented or learned we are, nothing can help us. We leave everything behind, not only our relatives, our friends and our possessions, but even our precious body.

From the moment that we are conceived in our mother's womb, this precious body and our consciousness are inseparable. But when we pass away, even this precious body, for which we care so much, has to stay behind. Many people believe that our consciousness dies along with our body, like a candle blowing out. But it isn't so. Our body and our consciousness are two separate things.

Our body is a life form that we inherited from our parents, that grew and developed, and that will eventually disappear. The body is a visible and solid organism, which we can apprehend with our senses.

The mind, however, is something completely different. It is not a solid entity, and so, when we die, it cannot be disposed of in the way our bodies are. It

continues in another form of life and when it does, nothing of its present life goes with it. What does follow it is karma, the result of the actions that we perform in this life, and which will determine the kind of life form that we will be embodying in the future.

It is written in the Sutras: "When the time comes and the king dies, none of his possessions, none of his friends, none of his relatives can follow him, however numerous these may be. His consciousness has to travel all alone to an unknown destination."

The same applies to us. When our time comes, the only thing that follows us is our karma, the result of the actions that we have performed. This will follow us, just as our shadow follows us wherever we go. For this same reason, the life that we are living now doesn't come out of the void. Nothing appears out of empty space; what's more, nothing appears due to the wrong causes and nothing appears due to incomplete causes.

For example, each and every grain has to have its own seed. Wheat will not grow from a rice seed. In order for wheat to grow, we need to plant a wheat seed. Not only this, but the right causes and conditions must be present, such as a fertile soil, moisture and a suitable temperature.

So when all the causes and conditions come together, then the result is bound to appear. Similarly, the experiences that we have in this life do not appear out of nowhere, or from the wrong causes, or from incomplete causes. Each and every experience that we have now has to have its own causes. These causes do not come from outside forces, but they are the results of our own actions. Everything positive that we experience such as good health, long life, prosperity and so forth, all of this is the product of our own positive actions. The same applies to our negative experiences, such as a short life span, illness, poverty and so forth. No outside force created them. They are all the result of our own negative actions.

So this unique teaching of the Buddha, the law of karma, means that we are the authors of our own reality. And so, if we truly wish to have happiness, and we truly wish to be free from suffering, then we must work on the causes of happiness. Without working on the causes, we cannot expect to produce the result.

For example, in order to cure ourselves from a disease, we must avoid what aggravates it and we must use the right therapy to cure it. So similarly, in order to eliminate suffering, we must eliminate the causes of suffering. And in order to experience happiness, we must create the causes of happiness. So what are these causes?

According to the Buddha's teachings, the main cause of samsara, or the cycle of existence, is not knowing the true nature of the mind. And so the source of all suffering is ignorance. Ignorance, in the sense of not seeing the true nature of the mind. Instead, without a logical reason, we cling to the concept of a self.

The Buddha's teachings state that there is no self. If there were a self, it would have to be our name, or our body, or our mind. But our name is empty, in the sense that it's just a label that our parents gave us. Any name can be given to anybody, at any time.

As for our body, if we try to examine our physical body, from head to toe, we won't find anything that we can call the self. Even in our ordinary use of language, we don't consider the body as being ourselves. We make a connection between the self and the body. We say "my hand" in the same way as we say "my house", or "my possessions". So when, for example, we say 'my house', it is obvious that the house is not the self, it just belongs to us. The same applies when we say "my body", the body belongs to us but the body is not the self.

With regards to the mind, when we divide the mind into past, present and future, the past mind is something that is already gone, and the future mind has yet to appear. So neither of these two can be the

self. As for the present mind, it is actually changing from moment to moment, and something that is constantly changing cannot be our self. Our mind, our consciousness, is the same continuity, but it always varies.

For example, once we were babies, and now we're adults. Two very different minds. But at the same time, it is the same mind continuum, it is unbroken, it carries on uninterruptedly. This is why we can remember things from our childhood. The stream, the mind flow, is the same but the actual mind is changing every single moment. Something that is continuously changing cannot be the self either. So in reality, there is no self, there is no logical reason that can prove that there is a self.

But we have a very strong tendency from the very beginning, from beginningless time, to think that the body and the mind together form a self, and this clinging to the self is the source of all our faults. And it is the source of all our suffering. Because when there is the self, then, in juxtaposition to this, there are others. And when there is the notion of self and others, there is attachment to one's own side and hatred for the others'. This gives rise to the three root poisons, which are ignorance, desire and hatred.

With these three defilements, all the other impurities arise in the mind. And as a result of this, we take negative action - physical action, verbal action and mental action. And when we take negative action, we do something akin to planting a bad seed in fertile soil. Due to these impure causes, the harvest will be rotten. In the same way, these actions will make our life rotten.

Physical, verbal and mental actions that arise from these defilements are called non-virtuous deeds, and they are what creates all our disturbances and suffering.

No outside enemy can create major sufferings. No outside enemy can create as much disturbance as

our own defilements can. So our worst enemy is not outside, our worst enemy is actually within our own mind.

The person who feels hatred cannot possibly experience peace or happiness. Not only that, but this hatred also affects everybody and everything around him or her. All the disturbances and all the calamities, man-made calamities, that we face today come from human beings' hatred. Hatred is the worst enemy that anyone can have. It destroys one's own peace as well as that of others.

It is easy to say that the defilements are the source of all suffering and that they are negative. But it is quite another thing to actually realise it and to correct ourselves, because our mind has been associated with defilements since beginningless time. The concept of beginningless time is something difficult to comprehend.

We pointed out earlier that although our present body came from our parents, our consciousness cannot have come from them. It is not that our consciousness arises from nowhere, or due the wrong causes, but rather it has its own continuity. And so our present consciousness needs to have had this same continuity before we took our present life. In this way, we can see how there has been a life before this present life. And a life before that one, and another before, so that one could never establish where this continuity began.

There is no such time as the beginning of a person's consciousness. The nature of life is such that it has no beginning, it has been the same continuum from beginningless time. So as oneself wishes to be free from suffering and as oneself wishes to experience happiness, every sentient being has the same feeling. It is wrong to thrive to obtain only our own happiness and get rid of our own suffering, we have to think of all the other beings surrounding us.

All through our life, we were taken care of with love and compassion. When we were first born into

this world, if our mother had not looked after us out of loving kindness and compassion, we would not have survived. But thanks to our mother's love and compassion, we survived. When we turned from a baby into a child, and later into a teenager, and then into an adult, all through our life we were cared for and looked after with compassion and loving kindness.

Even when we are healthy and do not face any major problems, no matter who we are, whether we are great or small, we all long for loving kindness and compassion. Especially when we face suffering, when we are in pain, or we have to face old age, we have to depend on other people's loving kindness and compassion. During our whole life, from beginning to end, we have survived through the loving kindness and compassion of others. It is very wrong if we, as adult persons, do not reciprocate these feelings. If we don't bring happiness to others, we cannot achieve our own. So we must make every effort to develop loving kindness and compassion.

All the positive things that we experience now are the product of the positive actions that we have performed in the past. Likewise, our present positive actions bring about our happiness in the future. Therefore, as we are longing for happiness, it is important that we work on the causes of happiness. Without working on the causes, we cannot expect the result.

Positive actions that are free from the defilements, such as ignorance, hatred and desire, but rather are performed out of loving kindness and compassion, are called virtuous deeds. They are the source of all happiness and qualities. We must make every effort to create these. No outside force, including our closest friend, can bestow us real happiness. Happiness has to come from our own actions. If we are really longing for happiness, we have to create the causes of happiness. In this way, we must work on the law of

karma.

Generally speaking, Lord Buddha's teachings say that the whole of samsara is nothing but suffering. The teachings describe three kinds of suffering. The first is called the suffering of suffering. This means the suffering that we as normal people tangibly feel, such as physical pain and mental anxiety.

The second is called the suffering of change. As we mentioned earlier, everything that is created by causes and conditions is impermanent and everything that is impermanent is suffering. It is a fact of life that powerful people can easily fall from power, wealthy ones can easily lose all they have, famous people can become unknown, and healthy people can become ill.

Things that we normally crave for, such as possessions, position and fame, are not worthy of any attachment. Sooner or later, we are bound to lose them and when we do, this will cause us great suffering. The suffering of change means that what we ordinarily consider to be happy feelings, is in reality suffering. What we experience as happy feelings is really only so in comparison to their opposites: when we are ill and then recover, we feel very happy. But good health is not really happiness, because it is impermanent. We can again fall ill at any moment. Anything that is impermanent is suffering. What we consider happiness is only so in appearance.

If what we think brings us happiness is a real cause of happiness, then the more we have, the happier we should be. But it is also a fact of life that this is not so. If we take for example a person living in very poor conditions being offered to live in a luxurious home. At the beginning, this person will be very happy, enjoying his new opulence and comfort. If these new conditions were a real cause of happiness, the person should become happier with every day that goes by. But it doesn't happen this way. He will eventually tire of his new situation and will feel in need of a change. And so, what we normally consider

to be happiness, is in fact suffering. This is called the suffering of change.

The third kind of suffering is called 'the suffering of the conditional nature of all appearances'. This means that the feelings we normally consider to be neutral are also in reality suffering. However hard we try, we fail to find satisfaction. Wherever we go, whomever we associate with, nothing brings us satisfaction. We always have something to complain about. This shows how the nature of life is suffering. Just as the nature of fire is heat, whether it is a small fire or a big fire, the nature of life, or cyclic existence, is suffering, whether it is light suffering or acute suffering.

In the same way that food that is mixed with poison is harmful whether it is delicious or foul-tasting, the whole of cyclic existence is suffering, whether it is in the higher realms or the lower realms. Keeping in mind the law of karma and the suffering of samsara, we should give up attachment to the whole cycle of existence. But first, we need to give up attachment to this life. Once we have done this, then we can give up attachment to the whole cycle of existence.

The third thing that we need to do is to embark on the true Mahayana path by developing loving kindness and compassion. We mentioned earlier how much we long for love and compassion. We need to remember that every other sentient being feels the same way. Moreover, if we consider the continuity of life from beginningless time until now, we see that we are caught up in this cycle of existence, taking innumerable births in different forms of life, and that there is no sentient being who has not become our very dear parent and our very dear friend.

It is wrong to only think of oneself. If, for example, one of our beloved family members is going through a difficult time, and we ourselves are in a safe place, we don't feel happy; we'd rather be there

with him or her and share his or her suffering. In the same way, if every sentient being has been our very dear parent or relative in past lives, we should feel the same way towards them.

And so, we should not work exclusively for our own wellbeing and ignore all the other living beings, who are actually our very dear parents. Every time they have become our parents, they have given us all their love and compassion, as our present parents have in this life. Therefore, instead of working for ourselves, we have to think of all other living beings. Besides, if we only think of ourselves, we're only thinking of one person, whereas if we think of others, we're thinking of countless beings. And between the one and the many, the many is evidently more important than the one. We must make every effort to develop loving kindness.

Loving kindness means the wish that other sentient beings be happy and have the causes of happiness. Loving kindness toward all sentient beings without exception, including our worst enemy, is the basis for the enlightenment thought. Once we have cultivated loving kindness, we can begin to develop the feeling of compassion.

Compassion means focusing on sentient beings that are experiencing suffering, wishing for these beings to be free from suffering and the causes of their suffering. The two, loving kindness and compassion, should not merely be understood intellectually. Rather, by contemplating and meditating on them, we should develop a deep inner feeling that our mind is immersed in the nature of loving kindness and compassion. Once we have attained this, there arises what is called the enlightenment thought.

Enlightenment thought means the wish to attain perfect enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. In this way, by practising loving kindness, compassion and the enlightenment thought, we give up the third attachment, which is the attachment to

our self. Every spiritual practice that we do is totally devoted to the benefit of other living beings. This aspect of spiritual practice belongs to the method side.

The method side alone is a great help in eliminating our faults, but it is not sufficient. It has to be combined with wisdom. Without wisdom, one cannot succeed. So now, we need to analyse what is wisdom.

Wisdom also has two paths. The first, its base, is concentration. Concentration in the sense that, through meditational techniques, we must bring our mind to a stable level. Our present mind is caught up in its stream of thoughts, and such a busy mind cannot be the base for wisdom. So we must practise concentration to bring the mind into singlepointedness. With our mind under control, we can meditate on wisdom. Wisdom sees the ultimate nature of all phenomena.

What is the ultimate nature of all phenomena? Different schools have different ideas on this. According to the highest Mahayana philosophy, known as the Middle Way, the true nature of all phenomena is away from all descriptions. If you describe anything, if you cling to anything, then you cannot have the proper view. The proper view is away from all descriptions. Through these two, concentration and wisdom together, we can eliminate our clinging to this life as real.

In order to travel on a road, we need eyes and we need feet. If we do not have eyes, we cannot see. If we do not have feet, we cannot walk. But with eyes and feet together, we can travel on the road. Similarly, wisdom is like our eyes, it allows us to see reality, while concentration is like our feet, it serves us as a vehicle. So, with the two together, we can succeed in attaining enlightenment.

I pray that all beings may be able to fulfill their wishes, temporal as well as spiritual.