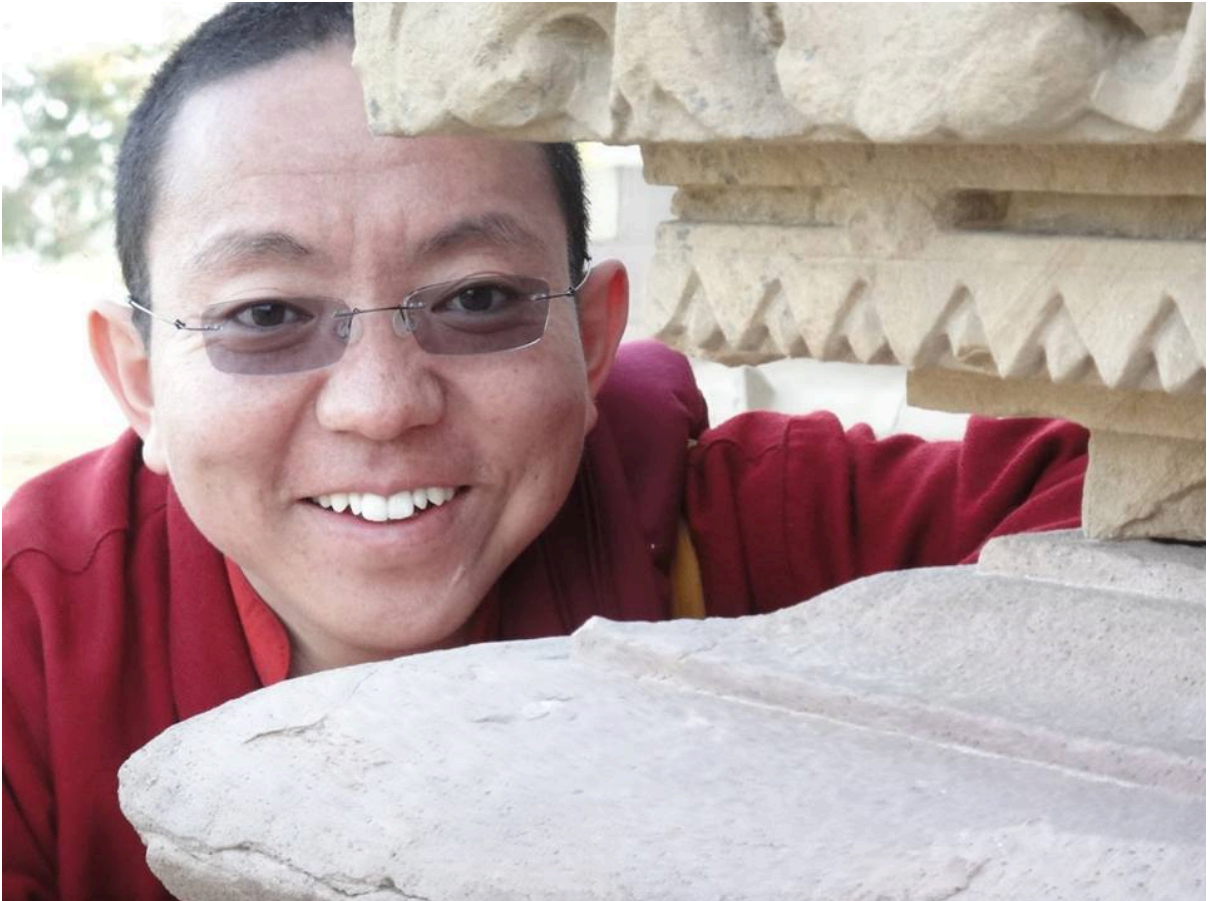


Witness to our own mind

Selected Talks



Dolpo Tulku Rinpoche

Foreword

If we really want peace on earth, where do we begin?

The beginning lies within our own peaceful, mental attitude, for the period of time, that we can sustain it with the wish to benefit others.

This is the implementation of peace.

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Taking Happiness And Suffering On The Path

Prague, 10. December 2014

In our lives we experience both good and bad times, enjoy happiness and well-being and also face all kinds of difficulties. In order to be able to cope with every situation and easily assimilate anything that happens to us on our life path, and eventually using this for our spiritual development, I want to give you some advice now. This is based on Buddhist teachings as well as on plain common sense.

Taking Suffering On The Path

Normally when we experience suffering in our every day life, we just want to get over it or make it go away as quickly as possible. We do not readily see any value in this painful experience, nor how it could help us in our life. But actually, we can learn invaluable lessons from our difficulties. This is what we call '*taking suffering on the path*'. What does this really mean? How is it possible to use 'suffering' for one's spiritual and personal growth? This needs to be explained carefully.

1) Reducing our sensitivity to difficulties in every day life

The first key point is learning to reduce our sensitivity to difficulties.

The intensity of suffering we experience is directly linked to how easily we are affected by a situation. We have a saying in my culture: "the more sensitive we are, the more problems we have". On the other hand, if we build up some resilience, we can slowly handle increasingly challenging situations without getting disturbed by them. This is the main reason that we have to learn to take difficulties on our path.

I have had many discussions with doctors, psychologists and physiotherapists over the last few years. They told me that the foremost method they use on their patients, is to distract them from the pain: whether or not it is mental or physical. This shows that when we identify with it, the perception of suffering increases.

Let's take an example of warriors. The emphasis in their training is to endure physical pain. So, if a normal person and a warrior were to perform the same physical work, the warrior does not mind getting scratched or hurt and spilling some blood. The non-military person, in contrast, might abandon his task the moment he sees the first drop of his own blood!

My main point here is that we need to learn not to take difficulties too personally and not to give them too much attention. If we do not concern ourselves overly with our problems, but accept them as part of life, they will lose their grip on us.

2) Taking suffering on the path from a Buddhist perspective

From a Buddhist perspective, taking 'suffering on the path' does not mean that the feeling of suffering will be magically erased. The key point is to find a way to deal with problems without being overwhelmed by them, in a way that we do not get depressed or stop functioning normally. Sinking into helplessness and defeatism signals the end of our spiritual practice as such. No matter what happens to us, we need to accept it without our basic well-being and our spiritual practice being affected. We need to learn to integrate anything that comes to us in our life and on our path. So if you thought you would come to this talk today and I would heal your cancer or something like that, then this is not going to happen. I know no magical tricks.

In Buddhism, we talk about four main kinds of suffering for human beings: birth, old age, sickness and death. When Buddha became aware of this, he taught these main kinds of suffering to be the natural stages in our life. If we can accept that these are happening to all of us, we do not need be carried away by despair. Buddha did not leave his royal palace to go into the wilderness to discover a way so that he would never get sick, would never have to age; nor would never have to die. What he did discover were ways to continue to have mental well-being, despite getting sick, old and having to die. So he taught us how to deal with suffering, not how to avoid it or erase it completely. His teaching has a very realistic approach.

If we can apply this to our lives, then we understand that difficulties are not just about making our lives harder: we can learn something from them to ultimately improve our life. Difficulties can teach us what we should avoid in future; how we should conduct our life, so we can handle problems better, or, so that we do not need to go through them again. This not just something that is Buddhist, but, also general knowledge and common-sense.

As I said before, our first reaction to difficulties is to get rid of them. In a way, this attitude can be beneficial to us, if it makes us seek a spiritual path to support us in finding a way of dealing with our suffering. A spiritual path shows us where a problem stems from, what is at its core, and what can be done to change the situation.

This is what the first set of teachings that Buddha gave consists of. We call this teaching *The Four Noble Truths*.

- The First Noble Truth is the *Truth of Suffering*, explaining the nature of suffering.
- The Second Noble Truth is the *Truth of the Origin of Suffering*, exploring the causes leading to suffering.
- The Third Noble Truth is the *Truth of Cessation*, meaning that it is possible to reach another state free from suffering.
- The Fourth Noble Truth is the *Truth of the Path* leading to such a state.

Many of us get interested in the Four Truths and their sequence when we face hardships and enquire on what we can do to resolve them. This is exactly the reason why Buddha taught them in the first place, 2600 years ago.

When we have a problem, we first need to look into the situation and gather information about it. This gives us an understanding about how it came about, and what we need to do to change it.

So because searching a way out of suffering is sparked by the experience of it, we say suffering helps us on the path. But if instead, we get overwhelmed by difficulties, lose our self-confidence and feel helpless, then suffering is not helpful to our path. We always need to bear in mind, that the essence of the true spiritual practice is wisdom and compassion. If one of them is missing, it is like a person missing a leg – we cannot proceed properly. Compassion therefore needs to be constantly present in our mind stream. Hardships help us to develop and strengthen it. Were we never to undergo hardships, we would never be able to develop wisdom, compassion and empathy for others.

If we know what it feels like to get pinched for example, we will not pinch another, because we don't want to hurt him or her. These kinds of thoughts will come up.

Let's have a good look at our mind: any feeling of compassion or love arises from empathy. In this way, our suffering helps our compassion to flourish and therefore is indispensable for our spiritual maturation. If we do not use suffering as a support spiritually, we will not be able to empathise with others and therefore we will lack compassion. Without compassion we will automatically harm others.

Therefore when we speak of '*suffering helps us on the path*' or to '*take suffering on the path*', it does not mean primarily to get rid of difficulties or to prevent it like anti-virus software that would prevent our computer from being infected by a virus. That is not the main point. The main point is, as a first step, not to get swept away by suffering, and, as a second step, to use it to strengthen our mental qualities.

Let's take for example a hospital stay. If we imagine all the nice things our friends are doing like having coffee or going to a movie, whilst we are the only one stuck in bed and in pain, then our misery will definitely deepen. The Buddhist approach first of all, and first step, would be to think that our sickness is due to our actions – also called karma - committed in the past, maybe a former life. Through being sick now, we purify the actions that led to the illness and we will not have to experience it again. That is a way to see the situation in a positive light. We can gain the mental strength from this painful experience and discomfort by wishing our family, friends and eventually all beings to be free from such an illness.

The second step is to wish, that we were able to take on all the difficulties related to such an illness upon us on behalf of all being undergoing similar hardships. If we can make such prayers or wishes, we will automatically feel more spirited and regain mental stamina whilst our experience of suffering will naturally decrease.

We all have people we love dearly like our parents and our partners. Were they to be very ill, we would wish to be able to relieve them from their pain, even if it means for us to take on some difficulties on their behalf. To help them does not tire us or overwhelm us. We actually enjoy it. Some people actually go as far as sacrificing their life for others. There is no calculation, whether this is fair or about what will be gained in return. Were such thoughts to come up, there is no way to full-heartedly give up something for someone else, whether it be time, money or even one's life. Actually, this is all due to a different way of viewing the situation than

we usually do. Thinking and behaving in this way should train our mind to be able to more easily take on difficulties.

Returning to the Buddhist philosophical view again, you might have heard about 'emptiness' before. There is a way to take suffering on the path utilising the view of 'emptiness'. We can liken this to quantum theory, which says that nothing really exists the way we experience it.

If we focus too much on our experience of suffering, asking again and again: 'Why do we have to feel this way?', 'Why is it only me?' or 'When will it finally get better?', we spiral deeper and deeper into despair. We get so caught in this feeling of anguish, that we cannot find our way out anymore. The whole situation then feels very solid and unchangeable. If we use the view of 'emptiness' here, we would ask the question: where is this pain actually located? What is its consistency? When we inquire into that, we cannot find a place where it abides, nor, its materiality. It is utterly elusive.

Usually we think: 'I am suffering.' But we never ask who this *I* is. If one has a stomach-ache, we might at first say: 'I am sick.' And then 'My stomach hurts.' Now is the *I* and the stomach identical? If we use the term *my* stomach we already make a separation between the *I* and the stomach. So who is this *I*, who is experiencing pain? And where is it located? If the body and neither is parts are the *I*, then is the *I* located outside of it?

Sometimes we think it is the mind or our ego, but then again we say *my* mind or *my* ego. This is the same situation as before. It is impossible to find the *I*. Contemplating in this way really helps, when we feel overwhelmed by difficulties. Let's say, we think 'I am so ill', when we have the stomach-ache, but then, when we realise the stomach is not 'me', we can create some distance, and so, not feel completely consumed by the pain.

If we can abide in meditation with this understanding that we are not the body, the experience, the thought etc. that is troubling us, then this definitely brings relief. So this is not just a spiritual view, it is a method anyone can use. Even though I said before, that there is not a "delete button" for suffering - actually there is, if we can contemplate in this way.

One of the things I am most afraid of, for example, are needles. I cannot stand to get an injection or acupuncture. That is actually the only time that I practice this contemplation on the *emptiness of I*. It helps me a lot. I look at the needle and dissociate from the part of the body, where it is being inserted. Then it is not *me* that is being pricked.

So now I have explained how to take suffering on the path by using the view of 'emptiness'. It decreases our experience of suffering, but importantly, without lessening our love and compassion.

How to take happiness on the path

Of course it is wonderful, when we are happy and all is going well, but these good times can also easily turn into suffering. To prepare ourselves so this does not happen is what we call '*taking happiness on the path*'.

Good times are very important in our lives, as these are the times when we are the most productive and we also enjoy ourselves. The problem is when we get too attached to feeling this way, or, if we get arrogant. Then our initial happiness becomes the cause for unhappiness.

Everything in our life is subject to change. It is normal that on some days, we are joyful, and on others, we are not so well.

But if we believe we must always be happy, and then encounter some difficulties, we will feel twice as bad than when we have a more accepting attitude of change.

If, for example, our sense of well-being is only connected with being rich, then we will suffer deeply when we become poor. Or, if we base our self-worth purely on beauty, then losing our looks in old age will be very difficult, and so on. Basically, if our well-being depends on external causes and conditions, and we also have a strong attachment to them and at the same time, we believe everything will stay the same, then any subsequent change will hit us very hard.

The attitude we need to develop is to enjoy whatever we have – wealth, beauty, a good position - but at the same time be aware of the fact that these circumstances are subject to change. If we can accept this, then we can freely take advantage of all the positive things in our life, but also, not be sad, angry or frustrated when they change.

Sometimes I meet friends who are older than myself, and if I use the word ‘old’ in connection with them, they might ask: ‘Who is old?’ ‘Who are you talking about?’ or ‘My physical age might be old, but I am young at heart.’ It is like they want to ignore the fact that they are getting old, but actually, they are just cheating themselves. It is a natural process to get old. Everyone has to go through it. If you are 80 years old, but keep on saying you are young, even if you say it a thousand times, you are still old. No matter what we try to make ourselves believe, it does not change anything about reality. If we cannot accept this, then whenever we are confronted with our age, we suffer.

I had a long conversation with a friend, where we looked at the advantages of being above forty, for example, acquiring a great deal of life experience; having skills that come through doing something over a longer period of time; gaining wisdom that results from having observed many situations in one’s life.

The younger generation might believe, that they can do anything, but in reality it is the generation above forty that have the decision-making positions in politics, the education system and in the economy. All the successful architects, engineers, and so on, are usually middle-aged. Experience and knowledge are very important qualities that make us much better in our jobs and personal life. So getting older is nothing to be ashamed of.

An understanding of change can also make us appreciate what we have. So if we have a nice apartment, for example, instead of comparing it to better, larger apartments, we can have a look at the living conditions of someone homeless. Then we can see more clearly how lucky we are and at the same time make aspiration prayers for the poor to find better living conditions, if we are not able to help them directly. We need not only to have compassion for

those in need, meaning to have a deep seated wish for them to be free of suffering, but also love, and a wish for their happiness. So we should pray that they experience well-being.

If we can train ourselves in wishing everyone around us happiness, we do not take the position of being jealous of anyone anymore. At present, most of us can be easily upset, if someone has a better job than us, more money, a better car and so on. Without a deep-seated wish for others to be happy, circumstances like that can make us unhappy. Their happiness is something that bothers us. But, if we are able to develop love, then we can be joyful about their well-being, and share it without any bad feelings.

This is a way to develop a more lasting kind of happiness based on our view of life, rather on our attachment to every changing external circumstance.

So again, when we are happy, all is well. We don't need to change the situation. All we need to do is to be aware that change is inevitable, so we are not unhappy when it happens. That is *taking happiness on the path*.

Witness to our own mind

Wasmuthhausen 27.11.14

The main point of the Buddha's teachings is to tame our own mind. Actually, there is not much more to them than that. The Buddha said in the *Sutra of the Vows of Individual Liberation*:

*Do not commit a single unwholesome deed;
Amass an abundance of virtue;
Completely tame one's own mind –
This is the teaching of the Buddha*

This shows clearly that taming the mind is of great importance. Without having control over our mind, anything we accomplish, no matter how plentiful, is of no value.

Whether we admit it or not, most of us are in the second half of our lifespan. It is important that we focus on our own happiness and on benefitting others during the short time we have left. Acting in this way is like an investment to render our life meaningful. This is the principal reason why we concern ourselves with the Buddha's teachings.

However, if our spiritual studies lead to more pride, anger and partiality, then the Dharma becomes poisonous instead of beneficial. In the Bodhisattva teachings, for example, it is said that even if we witness the destruction of Buddha's statues, we should be patient and never retort to violence. Instead, we should practice love and compassion towards the perpetrators. Therefore, the cultivation of love and compassion are key within Buddhism. If negative mental states increase, we are not practicing right.

One day, five people, who were not especially bright, swam down a stream. They counted themselves before they got into the water and when they got out. First they counted five and later one was missing. No matter how many times they checked, they could only count four, but were not able to tell who was missing. A stranger came by and asked them what they were doing, so they told him that they had been five people before, but one was missing, but they could not figure out who. So now they were sad and worried. The stranger asked them to count again, starting with themselves and then to go on counting the others. The result again was five as before.

This story explains really well how we normally act. We never take ourselves and our own actions into account when problems arise, but only focus on what others are doing. We judge who is good, who is bad, who is acting well, who is acting wrong and so on. Our opinion of ourselves usually is that we are doing the right thing, that we are acting honestly. Therefore, it can only be the others who are the problem and need to change their behaviour. That is a complete misunderstanding. What others do is their responsibility. Our responsibility is to watch our own mind and, as the only authentic witness to it, we need to change whatever negativities arise.

But, as I said before, the Buddha's teachings are aimed at gaining control over our own mind and to improve it. So when are they the most helpful? During difficult times, because then we

need to be vigilant not fall prey to negative emotions. But if we sit happily on a couch in a warm room with a nice drink in our hand, we don't really need them so much. Our mind will be relaxed anyway. If nothing triggers our jealousy, anger, desire and so on, then of course it might be due to our spiritual practice that no trigger objects pop up anymore, but mainly it is due to the environment we are in. But if we go to work, where there are people and situations that spark off our negative emotions, we need to use the advice given in the teachings to transform, or else we stay stuck in our anger or jealousy without being able to help ourselves.

In short, we need to bear witness over our mind and we need to use the teachings in difficult moments. Please keep this in mind!

Compassion in medicine

1) The role of compassion within the Buddhist philosophy

The two central points in Buddhism are wisdom and skilful means. Wisdom is the same as the knowledge we acquire through study and contemplation. Skilful means is the same as compassion.

Wisdom and compassion complement each other. If someone just has compassion but no wisdom, although they might want to help others, they would not know how. A mother, for example, will have great compassion and love for her sick child, but unless she has the appropriate medical knowledge, she cannot help.

Wisdom without compassion on the other hand can prevent someone with medical knowledge to help a sick person, because he or she doesn't feel a connection to the patient. These days we use words like self-defence to argue for the manufacturing and use of bombs and other weaponry. But no matter what terms we use, the underlying problem is that a great amount of knowledge is used devoid of compassion.

This connection between wisdom and compassion is not only important in a religious sense, but also in our everyday lives, as we can easily find out through our own experience.

2) The importance of compassion within the Himalayan medical tradition

The Buddha expounded four main tantric texts on medicine, which are considered the basis for the Buddhist-Himalayan medical tradition. They list three main requirements for a doctor to be successful in treating a patient. These requirements are said to be even more important than the instruments or the medicine used during the treatment.

Generally, we think it depends mostly on the medicine whether a doctor can cure a patient or not. But from the philosophical standpoint of these tantras, the medicine is only secondary to these three points.

The first is to generate compassion as the underlying motivation to help the patient.

The second is to overcome the conceptual divisions made, considering something as being clean or unclean.

The third is to treat everyone alike without taking family status, wealth or social position into account. This point includes speculating on any kind of compensation the doctor might get from treating the patient.

As said before, these three points are essential for being a good doctor in the Himalayan-Tibetan medical tradition, because they mark the difference between people becoming doctors merely to gain a livelihood and those whose intention it is to benefit others.

Now we will look at these three points in more detail.

1) Compassion

Compassion makes a great difference, for example, if a doctor is called to someone living far away. A doctor, who is compassionate, will first of all consider of the situation of the patient and not the hassles connected with reaching the patient's house. Compassion here would make the difference whether the patient gets treated or not.

For you here in Germany this might sound strange, but where I come from in Dolpo¹, the situation is like it was in Europe more than a hundred years ago. At that time you probably also had no ambulances, but the doctor had to visit the patient at home. It is quite clear that it was vital for the patient that the doctor make the journey, no matter how difficult.

Maybe there are some doctors or other people in the medical profession listening to this talk. I am sure you feel a difference in your stress level whether you have compassion or not. When we feel compassion for the other, we are more inclined to help and whatever needs to be done feels easier to do. Without compassion, helping is harder, more tiring and the goal is to finish as quickly as possible.

2) Casting aside concepts of clean and unclean

Again this point makes a fundamental difference in treating a patient. If a doctor is bothered by perceptions of filth, uncleanliness and so on, it will be difficult to help a patient, whose sickness brings about dealing with bodily fluids, vomit, excrement and so on. This is quite clear, I think. The less the doctor is concerned with what is clean or unclean, the more he can be of help.

3) Treating everyone alike

If the doctor is concerned about what he will get in return for treating the patient, he will concentrate more on that than on giving the right treatment. Thoughts like: 'How much can the patient actually pay me? What will I get if I treat her in this or that way?', make it doubtful whether the patient will get the help she needs, if she is not wealthy enough in the doctor's eyes.

We call these three requirements 'The Three Practices of a Doctor'.

If a doctor is not trained in these three practices, he will not be able to use his knowledge efficiently to help patients. The better he is trained in them, the better he will help. Anyone who has been to a doctor or visited a hospital knows that.

When I went to the hospital a few years ago, the doctor I met took a long time to explain in detail and with care what my illness was, how I had to take the medicine and what I had to do to get better. Afterwards, I really wanted to take the medicine and trusted in his recommendations. So, just the way a medical professional talks to us is important in whether

¹In the north-western Himalayas of Nepal

we have faith in his advice or not and whether we follow it or not. At least that is the case with me.

But if on the contrary everything is done correctly, like the physical examination and the blood test for example, but the person treating us is disengaged, we will feel uncared for and won't be able to trust his counsel fully, even though there might be nothing wrong with the medicine or the advice as such. It is just a matter of demeanour.

How to develop compassion

Everyone would agree that compassion is important. The question, though, is how we can develop it. Therefore, I will introduce a method from the Buddhist teachings to do so, as this is the most effective way I know through my studies.

The key point here is to develop empathy. The more empathy we have, the easier it is to engender compassion. This is not just something that we value in a religious or spiritual sense. In our everyday life, we consider someone to be a good person if they have an understanding for the situation of others. We can also see this in families. The closer the

family members are to each other and the more understanding there is between them, the happier they will be together. If they cannot relate to each other, then problems will arise.

Compassion arises from empathy. So what kind of empathy do we need? We need the deep understanding that the other person is just like us. Everyone wants happiness and well-being and everyone wants to avoid suffering just the same way we do. This is the basis for empathy, which leads to compassion when we meet someone suffering.

Usually we only empathise with people we feel close to, like our friends, relatives and a partner, but not with others we don't know so well. As medical professionals, of course, we don't just treat our loved ones. So if we can only relate to our inner circle with compassion but not to others, we have a problem. Therefore, we also need equanimity, which means to view all people as being fundamentally equal. This is achieved by contemplating the above mentioned point - everyone wants happiness and nobody wants to suffer. In this we are all the same. Without this equanimity, we might favour people from our country, who belong to the same community or faith as we do and have a lower regard for foreigners and people who belong to another community or have another faith. If we make these kinds of differences, we cannot develop empathy for the patients.

Empathy and compassion are part of human nature. Religions are only there to explain methods how these aspects of our nature can be developed, but no religion owns them. These feelings are accessible to anyone.

Based on equanimity, we can develop empathy through the method to exchange one's own place with that of the other. When we take the perspective of the other, we contemplate that this person just wants to be happy the same way we do and doesn't want suffering, the way

we do. So we imagine what it feels like for the other person when they are sick or treated harshly.

We can use this method under any circumstances, not just within the medical field. Most important are the people we deal with on a daily basis, like our colleagues, the patients we treat as doctors and our family members. For example, we can think: 'Oh, today I was really harsh with my partner. That's not good. How would I feel if someone talked to me like that?' Then we will quickly feel sorry for what we did and apologize. If we don't ponder in this way, we might actually believe we haven't been harsh enough and continue to be unkind.

Someone told me once she was secretly quite happy when her partner had a hard time because she was under the impression she was the only one to go through difficulties in their relationship. If she had really been to imagine the problems her partner was facing and put herself in his shoes, then she would have felt more compassion and an urge to help him.

We can also use this contemplation as a kind of meditation and imagine in front of us the person whose perspective we want to take – may it be our partner, colleague, patient – whoever we have to deal with. Then we put ourselves in their shoes. The moment we gain some understanding for their situation, it'll be easy to change our behaviour towards them. This will definitely help to improve our relationships.

How compassion helps us physically and mentally

These days, a lot of scientific research is being done in the field of compassion and how it affects our health. For example, researchers look into how the body cells and the brain functions change due to a training in compassion. The Buddha already described these processes by using examples, but of course not with the precision modern science provides.

A couple of years ago I had a discussion with the University of Freiburg, where they were planning to conduct some research on the benefit of developing compassion for medical professionals. A group of nurses and doctors was to learn a meditation on compassion and then to train in it for a few weeks. The idea was that if the outcome was good, a compassion training of this kind could be incorporated in the curriculum for nurse training. When I went there again last year, they showed me the results of the study. Differences in blood pressure and the heart rate were measured as well as the individual capability to deal with stress. Most people involved yielded very good results, reporting a decrease in blood pressure and feeling more empowered to deal with a difficult situation. Only a few of the participants said that nothing changed for them.

So with the use of machines it was possible to measure physical changes due to a more compassionate outlook. But we also know this by observing our own behaviour. When we are upset or angry, our breathing becomes fast and shallow and our heartbeat quickens. When we are relaxed and happy, our breathing deepens and our heartbeat slows down. This is something that is also explained in the Buddhist yoga texts.

The Buddhist texts explain compassion to be the wish to be free from suffering, whilst love is the wish for the other to be happy. Whoever feels this kind of kinship with others will

immediately have a slower heart rate and feel more in tune with others. That is a natural sign of physical wellbeing that can be observed easily. When we are in a loving and caring mood, we will not get angry, be jealous or have the wish to harm someone. This is a natural occurrence and this also has an effect on our inner tension and heartbeat. So it is very clear that love and compassion are beneficial to us.

So far, I have mainly spoken about physical effects. The psychological effects of love and compassion are that we do not get worn out easily by whatever we do and we feel more inclined to help. It feels easy to do something for our family or a friend. But to do the same thing for a stranger can feel almost unbearable. This is something all of us have experienced before, I am sure. That is why it is important to train in these positive states of mind if we want to be of help to others in the field of medicine.

Expectations In A Relationship

Wasmuthausen, November 2013

I have often noticed in relationships, that many people foster all sorts of expectations and demands according to their own rules, believing that their partner should behave exactly the way they think is right. Any other behaviour than the one sanctioned, no matter how helpful and thoughtful, goes unappreciated, or, is sometimes even unnoticed. This can lead to severe problems and misunderstandings within a relationship.

I know a young man, for example, who is also my student. One day he gave me a bell, a vajra and a book cover for his girlfriend, whom I was to meet on one of my travels. I delivered everything dutifully. A few months later, I met him again and he said: "Rinpoche, I got into so much trouble! My girlfriend said that those were the wrong kinds of presents for someone you love - I should have bought her flowers or something like that. She didn't even say 'thank you'!"

I really felt for him. From his perspective, he had bought her the nicest things he could think of. I had helped him shop and had given him advice regarding the quality of these items. He really wanted to make her happy, but she had another concept of a lover's gift and therefore wasn't able to appreciate his present at all. She simply couldn't see how well he had meant. With a little understanding, it could have been a great gift for them both, but in their situation, it turned into a big disappointment instead.

The most important point here is to recognise the motivation of our partner. What are they doing and why? Through this inquiry we might get a better understanding of their actions, start to appreciate their qualities, and can therefore develop compassion for them. This is the first point I wanted to mention.

The second point is, that we often tend to think only about what we are bringing to the relationship; what we are doing for the other, how supportive we are. If we think along the lines: "I am doing this for him; I sacrificed that for him. I helped him in this situation", then automatically the thoughts follow: "But he didn't do that for me. He didn't support me there. He didn't help me in this situation." It would be much more helpful to remember what our partner does for us in course of our relationship, how he or she supported us within their means without constantly weighing who is doing what against one another.

There are many relationships, for example, where one person stays at home and the other goes to work. When they meet up at home in the evening, they could start a fight, one arguing: "I am always at home cooking your dinner, cleaning up after you and washing your clothes!" Then the other answering: "In order to pay for your food, I need to go out every day and work for eight hours!" Both of them are doing an important job, but each one of them only sees their own contribution and doesn't appreciate the efforts of the other one. That is actually very sad and can endanger the relationship.

So please be mindful of your partner and try to see them for who they really are, and the positive things they bring to you.

Caring for the Dying

*Parish St. Paul as part of the Dialogue between religions
Munich, 11.11.14*

Today I am speaking here, in front of this Christian group, mainly from my position as a Buddhist monk. This happens quite often during my travels through Europe. I believe interreligious dialogue is very important, because we all know that it is not enough to simply talk about peace between nations, social groups and individuals. We need to live this peace. Therefore, it is important to know our different ways to develop love and compassion, and how to spread and to implement them. This is why today's meeting is for me of great importance.

All religions have a different historical background, different philosophical views and different structure to them. But their final goal, their essence is almost identical. And this is to bring wellbeing and happiness to humans and the world as such. Therefore, it is important, that religions appreciate and respect each other. The reason for this diversity of religions is that people have different preferences and different characters. Just like some people prefer sweet to sour, people have different 'spiritual' tastes. No one can streamline them into one. But when we eat, we also all just have the same main goal – to get full. In the same way, religions have a function to satiate us spiritually.

The main part of my talk is divided into three parts:

1. Death from the perspective of the Buddhist philosophy
2. The duties of a spiritual authority in Tibetan Buddhism, a lama, during the dying process
3. The duties of a lama after someone has passed away

1. Death from the perspective of the Buddhist philosophy

i) The view of impermanence: Death is part of a human's life

The impermanence of all phenomena – mental and physical - is a central part of the Buddhist philosophy. When the right causes and conditions assemble, a phenomenon comes into being and goes on to change from moment to moment until it is destroyed or dissolves. Naturally our life force and our body also undergo this process. Death is

therefore the natural consequence of getting born. Our life, which ends in death, is marked by constant physical and mental change.

This might sound grim at first, but actually has two positive aspects. First of all, impermanence gives us the chance to change difficult situations into positive ones. Also we can overcome negative character traits and develop good ones.

The second point is that our egoism naturally decreases the moment we understand that we will not live forever. Usually we do almost everything for our own benefit or the benefit of people close to us, because we think we will live forever and we need to secure the best for ourselves. The understanding how short our life is makes it easier for us to share.

ii.) The time of death is uncertain

The contemplation on impermanence of life leads us to the insight that no one knows when we will die. This increases our feeling of urgency to accomplish whatever we believe to be important without delay, because we realize we have limited time.

These are the reasons why regular meditation on impermanence is a central part of the Buddhist practice.

2) The duties of a spiritual authority in Tibetan Buddhism ,a lama, during the dying process

In our culture, usually a person who is a doctor as well as a lama accompanies the dying person in their last days. As a doctor, he will mainly treat the physical symptoms and try to restore the balance between the four elements constituting the basic building blocks of our body. As a lama, he assists the dying person spiritually. If there is no one who can fulfil both roles, of course two separate people are present.

i) The spiritual accompaniment of a dying person

The main instruction, given to the person facing death, is called *To behave like a beautiful woman looking in the mirror*. When someone looks into a mirror to make up, she will not apply the make up to the face in the mirror. She would be deluded. Of course her own face needs to be made up and flaws corrected. In the same way, the dying person needs to examine the kind of illusions appearing in his mind instead of reacting to them as if they were happening in the outer world; he needs to correct his own mind.

Through the gradual deterioration of the body, one loses balance, and the sense perceptions of smelling, seeing, hearing, tasting and feeling are changed drastically. This is a very painful and confusing process. That is why the lama gives this instruction *To behave like a beautiful woman looking in the mirror* in order to convey to the dying person what is actually happening and to tell him that what he is perceiving is just a mental apparition.

Some of you may have already assisted someone on their deathbed. You may have noticed that they experienced things that were not happening at all. A person who fought in war, for example, might be reliving these experiences and get very frightened. *To behave like a beautiful woman looking in the mirror* also refers to how easy it is to mistake one's own mental images as something external to oneself and to try to manipulate them. This is very tiring and frustrating. If the dying person is reliving an upsetting episode of her life and she gets reminded that this not real, it is like waking her up from a bad dream. If she believes to be in happy time in her life, then of course it is better to leave her undisturbed.

Another important process is the gradual degeneration of the elements like water, fire, earth and wind, which make up the body. Each element has a certain energy and facilitates certain functions. When this power energy decreases, the body can no longer function properly. For example, if the earth energy weakens, it becomes difficult to raise one's head and limbs. Sometimes the dying person asks to be held for the feeling of falling down. The lama at that time has the responsibility to introduce the dying person as well as the people assisting to this

dissolution process by explaining the inner and outer signs so it becomes understandable and prevents confusion.

A good example for this is a tunnel of horror in an amusement park. I went to one such in Singapore. Different figures appear, like skeletons, and it is of course very, very dark. Riding through it the first time, it is quite scary. The second ride is easier, because one knows what is going happen. The third time might even be amusing. In the same way, when the lama explains what happens during dying, the person will not be so afraid as he has already been introduced to the apparitions resulting from the changes in the body.

The mental state is not only important at the time of dying as such, but also has consequences for the future life. In Buddhism, the continuity of the mindstream is one of the core assumptions. The next life is mainly shaped by the way someone behaves in the current life, but his mental state at the moment of death is also an important factor. It has an impact of probably 20%. So it makes a lot of difference whether a person is frightened and tense or relaxed and happy at death.

ii) The role of the lama as a witness. He is present when the dying person states her last wishes like the division of her possessions. Here in Germany there are laws that regulate inheritance, but in my place there are not. If no clear instructions can be found or remembered after the passing away of a person and there are different opinions amongst the beneficiaries, the lama has the authority to step in and clarify the situation. Knowing that there will be no problems after death is very consoling to the dying person and helps a peaceful passing.

3) The duties of the lama after death

If the lama has great spiritual power and a lot of love and compassion for the deceased, it is said that his prayers in the first three days will be very helpful. This includes aspiration prayers for a good rebirth as well as rituals to show him the best possible way in the intermediate state before he takes on a new body, also called bardo.

During these first three days astrological calculations are used to find out how to best dispose of the corpse – whether it is better to burn the body, bury it or offer it to wild animals. This last option is not practiced in Europe, but in the Himalayas it is quite common. If a person dies who was part of a very closely knitted family, where there is a lot of love and warmth between the members, the loss is felt deeply. The family is suddenly incomplete. In this case, astrology also helps to find the most suitable time and circumstances to carry the body out of the house. If it is known, though, that the cause of death was an infectious disease, a doctor will also advice on the disposal of the corpse.

After these three days, the body is then laid to rest according to the recommendations. Prayers for the deceased continue for 49 days after her passing away. Sometimes daily, but at least on the same weekday as the death occurred. Afterwards there is usually an annual ceremony held on the anniversary.

Directly after the passing, the possessions of the deceased are divided up according to his wishes. One part is usually used for charitable projects like building bridges and streets or as

alms for the poor. If the body is burned, the ashes are often mixed with water and earth to make paste. This paste is then formed into small statues called tsatsas, which are brought to holy places in India and Nepal, like for example Bodhagaya, where the Buddha reached enlightenment. The lama also guides the family in these activities. The main aim is to benefit as many people through the body and the possessions of the deceased.

Buddhist view on the treatment of animals

This talk was given on June 19th, 2012 in Malaysia

The main reason why I'm giving this talk today is what Nicolas, a six-year-old boy said to me: "Humans behave like monsters towards dogs." It impressed me that the young child already had this perception of humans acting savagely towards animals, even more than us grown-ups, who should be more considerate but often don't even have the ability to think in that way. And I don't need to mention the countless ways in which humans afflict pain and suffering on animals all over the world. First, I want to pay heed to Nicolas' request to talk about the situation of dogs in Malaysia; how they are often mistreated and what we can do to better this. Then I will talk in four topics about the relationship between humans and animals in general.

For example in order to buy a dog in a shop in Malaysia, the shop owners first often catch street dogs and lock them into plastic cages, inseminate the bitches artificially and take the puppies shortly after birth. The bitches stay locked up in the cages and never get out for walks for the rest of their lives. That is suffering the mothers of the dogs we buy in shops have to endure. Normally dogs live up to the age of 11 or 12 years old, but the dogs kept in cages under these conditions die within two years.

Great suffering is often endured by street dogs staying in the vicinity of restaurants. Of course the restaurant owners are not expected to feed them, but what's worse is that sometimes they throw hot oil on the dogs to burn their skin. The coat doesn't re-grow and the dogs later die of skin diseases. Children witness how restaurant owners torture the dogs and I've heard of children as young as five years old gathering to pour burning oil on dogs and to set them on fire.

There is also a notion that neutering a dog is in conflict with religion and therefore the procedure should not be performed, letting the dogs have as many puppies as they like. The problem is not having puppies as such, but that nobody looks after them once they are born. We have to bear the responsibility of caring for the puppies, if we allow for them to be born and should not just abandon them.

Now I want to speak more generally about animals in connection with humans under the following four points:

- 1) The connection between humans and dogs
- 2) How harm comes about through the use of animals by humans
- 3) How humans benefit from animals
- 4) How to take care of animals

- 1) The connection between humans and dogs

Relationships between humans and dogs started about 10.000 years ago due to mutual need. Dogs were useful for hunting, for protecting the livestock from wild animals like wolves and

the possessions from thieves. In return, humans gave dogs food and protection from the elements. These days, especially in the cities, the relationship has changed as people don't hunt or keep livestock. Dogs are now mainly kept as pets and companions to humans.

When I was a yakboy in my childhood, I really liked the yak calves because they were very cute. I wanted to play with them but had no understanding of their needs. So whenever I tried to get a hold of them and play with them, they'd run away. I couldn't get close to them. One day I held my hand out to one of them and as we don't wash much in Dolpo, it was very salty. The calf sucked on it as salt is one of the things they need to stay healthy. Then I learned how to get close to the calves and would offer them my hands when I wanted to approach them to play with them. I came up with a way that benefitted both sides.

It is clear from a general point of view as well as my personal experience that the relationship between animals and humans arises from mutual benefit and that we have to keep in mind the animals' well-being.

2) How harm comes about through the use of animals by humans

From the point of view of science and of Buddhism there are numerous ways in which humans' use of animals is detrimental. For example the eating of meat is one of the main factors for the destruction of the environment and the rising level of CO₂ contributing to the climate change. Overfishing the oceans has caused around 90% of the large fish stock like cod and tuna to disappear. These large fish eat the smaller fish keeping their population under control. With the large fish missing, the small ones multiply rapidly depleting the plankton they feed on, endangering the balance of the marine ecosystem.² This of course also has consequences for humans as plankton is one of the main carbon absorbers, helping to trap greenhouse gases and counteracting climate change.

It is estimated that about 80% of farmland is used for producing meat³, causing a shortage of food for humans in certain areas. The production of meat is often more profitable than producing vegetables, fruit and grains for direct consumption, which would be affordable to poorer people leaving those out of the loop. It is estimated the meat production will increase even more, up to 70% between 2000 and 2030.⁴ This will result in further deforestation and even more use of farmland to produce food for slaughter animals.

Deforestation and destruction of nature to produce more farmland are considerable factors in causing the landslides and floods that we have experienced worldwide in the past few years. These occurrences will only increase with an increase of meat production as well as the acceleration of climate change. Normally we only think of cars, planes etc. that contribute to the CO₂ emissions and we tend to overlook the role of meat production accounting for 20% of the global emissions, which is estimated to be more than what all the

² Greenpeace website: www.greenpeace.org/international/en/campaigns/oceans/overfishing/

³ The New Yorker, 23 May 2011, p. 32 ,Test-tube burgers'

⁴ The New Yorker, 23 May 2011, p. 32 ,Test-tube burgers'

cars, trains and planes combined produce.⁵ This is not just some Buddhist thought, but just what the actual situation is.

Now I will talk from a Buddhist perspective. The karmic consequences of harming or killing animals out of self-interest are that our present lifespan is shortened and in the next life we are likely to be killed, for example if we are born as animal we might fall prey to another animal.

3) How humans benefit from animals

Scientific studies have shown that keeping a pet can improve the owner's health and mental well-being. Dog-owners for example have to walk their dogs regularly, which provides them with exercise to keep them healthy, especially if they do not engage in any other sport. Scientists have also shown that pet-owners experience more peace of mind and have fewer worries. Pets express their love to their owners, which in return can lift the owner's spirits. When we play with a dog or a cat, we immediately feel good, we laugh and might even be able to sleep better. If we have two people who worry and we give one a dog to play with, the one with the dog will forget his worries more easily.

From a Buddhist point of view we have the six transcendences, or six paramitas, and one of them is the "transcendence of generosity". To take care of an animal, to save and protect its life like parents would their children's is included in this transcendence of generosity.

4) How to take care of animals

Within the Buddhist thought we distinguish between a virtuous and non-virtuous action, which goes further than just scientific reasoning - as in the case of stopping meat consumption. It is very important to think about the effects on the environment and our health, if we continue to treat animals the way we do now, considering scientific findings. But we should also contemplate that animals are the same as us in their wish to experience happiness and to avoid suffering. That is easy to do when we take a cute dog or cat as an example. If we hurt it, it runs away. If we are friendly with it, it comes near us. This shows that they avoid suffering and long for happiness just the same way we humans do.

In short, three things are need to take care of animals. The first one is to treat animals with loving-kindness. Secondly, it is to develop an understanding for them. And finally, it is for us to take responsibility for them.

The importance of loving-kindness towards animals. On the Internet, there are many clips showing the power of a loving relationship between humans and animals. There is one of a lion that was raised by a man. When the lion got bigger, it was admitted to a zoo, but when this man visited the lion hugged him through the iron bars like a child would her mother. So even a lion needs and appreciates the love given to it.

⁵ The New Yorker, 23 May 2011, p. 32 ,Test-tube burgers'

There is a story of the great yogi Milarepa, who was in meditation when nearby a hunter named Kiram Gonpo Dorje was chasing a deer with the help of a dog. The deer was on the run and fled into Milarepa's cave, and lay down to his right side without any fear. It was attracted by Milarepa's loving-kindness, not by food in the cave. When the hunter came in, his dog lay down peacefully to the left side of the yogi. The deer and the dog behaved like friends through the power of loving-kindness.

The need to develop an understanding for animals. Without understanding we don't know what harms or what benefits an animal. I explained that in the story about my childhood, when I tended yaks and had to learn what they needed in order to approach them and play with them. Only when we gain awareness of the animals' disposition we can develop a bond with them. We should not just impose our own thinking and our own rules on them. Instead we should consider their nature and act accordingly. In Europe people keep a lot of dogs and give them all sorts of hairstyles. Normally the coat functions to protect them from the cold, but sometimes the dogs get shaved down to the skin and then tremble when they get outside. Here humans apply their preferences without considering the animal's needs.

I also saw a cat who got its fangs coated with gold. The cat didn't approach its owner for a couple days afterwards, even though it was very friendly usually. The owner did that because he thought it looked funny, but he didn't consider the cat's feelings.

Taking the responsibility for animals that are in our care. We have to protect the animals we keep. One of my students asked me the other day to perform prayers for his recently deceased dog. When I asked him what happened, he cried. The dog had been run over by a car when it was on a walk without a leash. The owner didn't take proper care.

At the end of this talk I urge you to think carefully about this topic and to act in a responsible, compassionate way towards animals.

The Four Seals

The Basic Buddhist View

University Potsdam, Germany, 03.12.13

The main topic today is a summary of the Buddhist creed. As we only have limited time, I am not sure I can cover everything that I would like to cover, but I will do my best. Buddhism denotes the system which follows the Buddha's teachings, and I am sure everyone here is familiar with Buddha, so I don't have to explain anything in this regard. His teachings, also called Dharma, have the main aim to transform harmful states of mind into beneficial ones. In this regard, we can identify two points: the "view" and the "conduct".

The "conduct" of a person needs to be motivated through compassion, and, has at its core, the idea of non-violence based on this compassion.

Compassion here goes beyond not only human beings, but also includes all beings capable of experiencing suffering and happiness. We aim to benefit them all in whatever way possible, based on the understanding of our inter-connectedness. So the objects of our compassion are the innumerable beings that exist. We try to avoid harming them and instead try to help them, without any bias, and without claiming that some deserve our compassion but others are to be excluded. This is, ideally, how we should behave.

There are many reasons why we should have compassion for all beings. For people who live in the West, I think we can use pets as the best example. We can easily see how beneficial it is to have a pet, and how we enjoy its company and affection. This shows us how compassion is a positive factor in our life and we can easily see the benefits of extending this compassion to more and more beings.

Now, we come to the "view". The view must be based on certainty, and therefore, we must first of all examine it thoroughly using logic. Blind belief without reason cannot be called a valid view within the Buddhist system. Careful study is therefore emphasised.

Buddha said: *"Do not accept my view and conduct of non-violence because you believe in me, but because you have examined them yourself using logic and discernment."* Naturally, it is safe to say that Buddhism is a coherent system of logic and analysis.

The "view" is based on different doctrines, like the "Four Noble Truths"⁶. Most of you here will be familiar with them. Another foundation of the view is the "Two Truths"⁷. Today, however, I will talk about the "Four Primordial Seals".

The first Seal is: **'All that is compounded is impermanent'**.

The second is: **'All that is contaminated is suffering'**.

⁶ The Four Noble Truths were the Buddha's first sermon. They are: 1) the Truth of Suffering; 2) the Truth of the Origin of Suffering; 3) the Truth of Cessation; 4) the Truth of the Path (to Cessation)

⁷ The Two Truth are the Relative Truth and the Absolute Truth

The third is: **'All phenomena are empty and without self'** .

The fourth Seal is: **'Nirvana is peace'**.

To understand the philosophy of the views, like any one of the Four Seals is completely indispensable, if we want to be Buddhist.

We talk about *"Buddhists by view"* and *"Buddhists by conduct"* .

People who act with compassion and adhere to non-violence can be called Buddhists by conduct; however, they might not be Buddhists in their thinking. There are many people like that. So to find out if someone is a Buddhist by view, we have to see what his understanding of the Four Seals is. A Seal here means that the entire Buddhist view can be summarised within it.

I, for example, was ordained as a monk. It was only after my ordination that I started to study Buddhism, and learned about the Four Seals in one of the advanced classes. Until then, I was only a *"Buddhist by conduct"* , but not yet by *"view"* as I had no clear grasp of the philosophy.

Definition Of The Four Seals:

1) All that is compounded is impermanent

This means that all that arises due to causes and conditions changes moment by moment. The room we are in for example, the building, the tables, the people - everything is changing all the time. The atoms of this table in front of you are constantly subject to change. This is something Buddha already taught long before modern science did, and apparently also before his time there were Hindu schools claiming that there is constant change of even the smallest particles.

Generally though, we do perceive material things like this table to be permanent and unchangeable once built, and also up to the moment they break. This is erroneous thinking. We can also apply this to ourselves. We get stuck in our thinking that these are our qualities and these are our faults, without any chance of changing.

If we compare, for example, the knowledge we had when we entered university and then see how it has grown over four, five years of study, then we can observe a real difference. We move from someone who knows very little about a certain subject to someone learned in it.

So what this sentence *'All that is compounded is impermanent'* shows us, is that not only matter is subject to constant change, but also our mind. This implies that there is a real chance for us for us to improve.

This Seal also denotes a significant difference from Buddhism to other religions. If everything comes together and changes through causes and conditions, it means that no outer force is bringing anything into being. The statement negates an independent creator and Buddhism therefore does not accept the notion of an independent creative force of any kind.

The most important figure in Buddhism, is the one who shows us the path to achieve happiness and avoid suffering: our guide, namely the Buddha. But all he can do is point to this path. We are the ones who have to follow it. He is not able to change us.

For example, as this table does not have the right causes and conditions to grow apples on it, then even Buddha is not able to make them grow! But if the causes and conditions for something to arise are assembled, then also there is no-one who can stop the process. So this is the argument, which refutes the existence of a creator within the Buddhist philosophical system.

2) All that is contaminated is suffering

All beings, including humans, do not wish to suffer. It is very important, therefore, to find out what methods help to end suffering. What do we have to know to overcome suffering? These are significant questions.

The statement uses the word '*contaminated*' and here Buddha refers to the contamination of our mind through negative mental states. This means that suffering is not an outer object but a mental state.

For example, the premises of this university are very beautiful, but if we had a bad day because we didn't pass an exam, or, something upset us, we will not be able to enjoy it. On the other hand, when we are happy and we encounter difficulties we don't get immediately swayed by them. This shows us that happiness or suffering is not mainly produced by something external, but depends on our thinking. Happiness and suffering are products of the mind. There are objects that trigger harmful states of mind, and then the harmful state of mind in itself causes us to suffer.

All phenomena arise due to causes and conditions. For example love, compassion and wisdom are generated through causes and conditions and they are also impermanent. But they do not give rise to negative states of mind and therefore do not result in suffering. So we can distinguish between states of mind, which bring suffering, and, states of mind that don't. As we said before, it is possible to change from suffering into happiness through the notion of impermanence.

Sometimes, everything goes well, and for example, we are in a nice temple. There, it is easy to feel relaxed and happy. In these situations the Dharma (Buddhist teachings) do not need to be implemented. But when we face difficulties in our job, in our family and so on, we have to use the Dharma to change harmful thoughts into beneficial ones. This is the most important point to understand here.

Many people make a big distinction between their everyday life and their spiritual practice. If we have a good look at Buddhist teachings though, then they are all aimed to help us in our everyday life without splitting off a separate spiritual life. For example, if we go to the office and get angry or jealous at our colleagues, then we need the Dharma to give us guidance on how to deal with our mind. When we happily sip our coffee and sit in the sunshine, we can just remain as we are.

If we have any doubts about the best time and the best environment to live the Buddhist teachings, then the best time is when we encounter difficulties and the best environment is the one we are actually presently in. We don't need any special time for meditation or prayer, and no special environment like a temple.

If we consider prayer and meditation are the most important practices in Buddhism which act as antidotes to our harmful states of mind, then we have a wrong understanding. These are branch-practices. The most important practice is how we deal with other people in everyday life. At work, for example, all sorts of emotions arise. At that particular time, we cannot always take a break to pray or meditate. What we need to do is to reflect on what is going on in our mind, relax, and find the most appropriate way to deal with the situation. That is essential.

So, when we talk here about '*All that is contaminated is suffering*', then by "*contaminated*" we mean our negative states of mind, and the objects we perceive in relation to them. The Dharma is then used to carefully investigate what these negative states are; how they arise; what objects trigger them; whether these objects are actually present; or are they memories and so on in order to turn them into a positive direction.

3) All phenomena are empty and without self

Normally, we assume an inherent essence in the phenomena that we perceive. This concept is called the *self of phenomena*. When we talk about the *self of person*, then we mean the person that we impute on our five aggregates (footnote). This imputation we understand as an '*I*' which is a singular person.

The explanations given by the Buddhist texts refuting this notion of "*a Self*" are very similar to the scientific explanations of the nature of matter in physics. Therefore there are many scientists who are interested in this point: '*All phenomena are empty and without self*'. As a result, a number of them are currently visiting monasteries to learn more about Buddhist logic.

What is important to understand here, is that when we say 'phenomena do not have a self' it does not mean that there are no phenomena at all.

If we do not examine phenomena minutely, then all phenomena are there.

We are wearing clothes, there is an '*I*' and a '*you*' and so on. But if we have a close look to see in what manner phenomena exist, we find out that they do not have an inherent essence that we can prove, or that abides anywhere.

Our concept of how they exist as independent entities is destroyed through this examination. Within the nature of reality, no independent, singular phenomena can be found. We can claim though, that phenomena have something at their core, like the essence of fire is heat or the essence of water is wetness, but this is not an autonomous self.

Generally on a relative level there is an 'I'.

But, when we have a look at what in our body is the 'I', or, where the 'I' is located (as we associate the notion of 'I' with the body), we cannot find it.

This is what we call the *selflessness of the person*. We simply impute the 'I' on the body, which is a collection of many parts.

If 'I' were my hands, for example, then as I have two hands, there should be two 'I's. Normally we don't think in this way. Therefore the way we perceive the 'I' and the way our body is structured is different.

The *selflessness of phenomena* is explained very well in physics. For example, if we think there is a table, then we should look exactly at where this thing called 'table' is located.

Is it in the table top? Or in the legs? In which part is the 'table'? If we dissect what we call 'table' further and further, we end up with atoms, which have the nature of waves and matter. We cannot find an object that is 'table' by itself. All phenomena are the same. For example, what we call 'car' is an assembly of four wheels, seats, doors, a steering wheel and so on. But the wheels by themselves are not the 'car', the seats are not the 'car' and so on. There is nothing that we identify as being 'car'.

If I were to ask where from which direction the sun shines through the windows, then you would all think "from the left", because this is the thought that immediately comes to your mind. But my thought, based on where I am sitting, would be that it shines from the right side. Where the sun shines from is dependent on our position in the room, so the direction is actually relative to us and has nothing to do with the sun itself. Therefore we say that a *right* or *left* window is empty of an independent existence. We still believe these things to be true without questioning them. That is called '*grasping at the self of phenomena*'. But notions like '*left*' and '*right*', '*behind*' and '*in front*' only come into existence depending on our perception and have nothing to do with the objects as such.

The main point that this philosophical view teaches us is how we can counteract harmful states of mind.

We all have strong concepts about what is good and bad. Around that we establish all sorts of restrictions, rules etc. that we then apply to what we perceive.

My thoughts about what is right and wrong were really shaken up when I first went to visit foreign countries. I am sure when you travel, the same happens to you. A lot of what we believe in is based on our culture. This is in fact, not by itself right or wrong, good or bad. By understanding this point, we can overcome our judgements and the harmful states of mind like anger or desire that is associated with them.

4) Nirvana is peace

Nirvana means to have pacified harmful states of mind from their root, and, that love, compassion and wisdom have been completely developed. For example, Buddha lived in India from the time of his enlightenment up until the time he passed away. So his nirvana was in India. Therefore, nirvana is not some kind of heavenly place to which we have to go. It is a state of mind.

These Four Seals were expounded by Buddha himself in his teachings, called sutras, and they are the basis for all the different streams of Buddhism practised all over the world as for example in Thailand, India, Sri Lanka, Korea and Tibet.

There are some differences between Buddhist streams, for example, due to the weather. Monks and nuns in different countries will wear different kinds of clothes according to the weather in their countries. Also, the ancient culture and traditions of their countries influence how Buddhism is practiced in each place. In any case, the basic philosophical view as I have just explained to you now, remains the same in each stream or country.

How to overcome afflictive states of mind

Boudha, Nepal, October 2012

First of all, please give rise to the mind of enlightenment for the benefit of all mother-like sentient beings. We have here many Buddhists in the audience and every time you attend a Buddhist talk, you are asked to give rise to bodhicitta. It might sound quite trivial to you by now and you don't regard it as being important anymore. We think Mahamudra and Dzogchen are important, but bodhicitta isn't.

But the realized lamas say that it is harder to meditate on bodhicitta than it is to meditate on emptiness. They know this from experience, but as I don't have much experience either way, I can't comment on that. Most of you also study Buddhist texts and from them we know that unfabricated bodhicitta is what makes any practice an authentic Mahayana practice. If we lack it, we are not practicing Mahayana.

Patrul Rinpoche said that bodhicitta is supreme amongst all practices. Without it we cannot engage in Dzogchen or Mahamudra etc. as we will not follow the genuine path.

My point here is, never underestimate the value of bodhicitta but always remember its significance. We need to not only mouth the words or think about it conceptually, but give rise to it from the depth of our hearts. As methods for developing our compassion as a basis for bodhicitta we can use the three contemplations of 1) regarding all beings as equal; 2) exchanging ourselves with another and 3) seeing all beings as having been our mothers. We should train in those again and again, especially when our compassion lessens. The moment we feel true compassion for beings we won't have any difficulties helping them. Wanting to do whatever is necessary to benefit them becomes a natural reaction to their suffering without having to make any effort. We automatically develop understanding and empathy. Our Buddhist practice will, as a result, improve dramatically. Please don't forget that!

Now we will get to the main part of this talk, on how we can overcome negative states of mind. When we speak of subduing negativities, we first need to understand what these are. We study carefully what Mahamudra, Dzogchen, Madyamika and yogic practices are, for example, but when it comes to mental afflictions, we just say we need to abandon them. That is it. But we need to investigate further. We need to examine our mind minutely and see how anger, jealousy and so on, arise. How does it feel? How do I act under their influence? What are the consequences? The Buddha explained the mind in great detail in his texts. He described the positive states of mind, the neutral and the negative ones, what the different functions are; so we can look at our minds and identify the dominant emotions. Is it anger, attachment or any of the other ones? In the Mahayana texts the Buddha spoke roughly of 51 mental states, and in the Hinayana of 46. Of course, we don't have the time to talk about all of them now, so I will speak of 1) their essence, 2) how they arise and 3) how we can get rid of them.

1) Essence of afflictive states of mind— Afflictions are born out of an agitated mind

Generally we speak of three mental poisons— ignorance, attachment and aversion. But there are many ways of enumerating them. In the Abidharma the Buddha mentioned six root afflictions, from which all others result: ignorance, attachment, anger, pride, unfounded doubt

and wrong view. An example for unfounded doubt would be thinking that our friend has betrayed us though she didn't in fact do anything wrong. This kind of suspiciousness can make us very unhappy. But if we doubt in a positive way, for example when we think someone certainly helped us although we are not sure, it will make us happy.

These mental poisons bring us suffering whether we are Buddhists or not. The more we reduce them, the happier we will be. It is up to us.

2) How afflictions arise

Unwholesome states of mind mainly arise for three reasons.

The first reason is having habitual tendencies towards afflictions we have cultivated over long periods of time. Psychotherapy seems to have the same approach when looking for the causes of anger, anxiety and soon by examining a person's childhood to see if something then triggered a current problem.

The second reason is being close to the object that triggers the negative emotion. For example, if we fancy an actor and see him, immediately attachment arises and we think how we could be like him etc. With children we can see how desire develops the moment they see some chocolate or ice cream. It's instantaneous.

You foreigners really like Asian countries. You are very happy here. The main reason is that you are removed from the sort of situations, which normally cause negative feelings. When I go to another country, I leave my responsibilities and everyday problems far behind. That is very relaxing even in Europe where everyone is so busy. The reason is that I simply don't have to deal with anything that could upset me.

When I visited Germany a journalist asked me whether I liked it there and why. I told him, that I thought Germany was great, because I don't have much background information. I just see the pretty houses from the outside and the clean environment. Apart from that, I have no idea what is really going on there. So I enjoy myself there very much.

A few days ago, though, I met a couple of foreigners who told me they wanted to leave Nepal after having lived here for some years, because no one is ever on time and there are so many other problems. They had stayed there long enough to know how Nepal really works, its political situation, the sort of difficulties there are. So wherever we stay for a longer period of time, we accumulate circumstances and conditions which trigger all sorts of unwholesome emotions.

The third reason is conjuring afflictive emotions through inappropriate thinking without needing an object. That includes sitting alone at home and for example pondering on the business we are involved in, how we could improve it, what could harm it etc. It happens to many meditators and yoga practitioners. From the outside, their bodies are in a perfect meditation or yoga posture, but their minds are occupied with thinking about things like how nice it would be to go swimming or to have some nice food. So even though there is nothing

actually there to provoke these thoughts, they get churned around in our minds and with them all sorts of mental afflictions come up.

Those were the three reasons – afflictions arising through habitual tendencies, through the power of the object and through inappropriate thinking. We need to reflect on these three points and see whether there is some truth in them. It is a kind of psychological analysis. When do these unwholesome thoughts arise? What sets them off? Which ones are predominant? etc. Then we will start to understand them better. We know what situations are difficult for us, how we react and how we might be able to avoid negativities in future or how we could counteract them.

3) How to gradually overcome afflictive states of mind

The most important point is to create a wholesome environment for us to be in. If we don't have that but aspire to meditate on Dzogchen, Mahamudra or any other high practices, we will not succeed. We should be in a situation, which does not encourage negative emotions. As I said before, when I come to Germany, just knowing that I am removed from my everyday hassles helps me to be more relaxed and happy. I don't need to put much effort into that nor does this come about through the power of my meditation.

I think a lot about how we can be in society and live our lives according to the Buddhist teachings and pacify our minds without needing a special meditation practice. So I have laid out the following five points.

1) Be honest – If we are honest a lot of our problems naturally subside. Most people who follow a religion are not very honest in their everyday dealings. They think that they are great practitioners, engaging in high sorts of meditation, but then conduct themselves disparagingly when out in society. But when we are dishonest, arrogant or engage in any other negative behaviour, we give rise to many afflictions. That is why the Buddha first taught the vehicle of humans and gods where engaging in the ten virtues is important. That is the basis to train in first. If we do not base our practice on that but try to immediately proceed to more advanced practices, we are not following the unsurpassed Buddha's path genuinely. We will go on a mistaken path and not progress.

Through acting in a straightforward, honest manner a lot of problems are prevented from the on-set. The opposite of honesty is to be deceitful. Wanting to deceive others is a fundamental cause for being unhappy and it creates various kinds of suffering. This is not just a Buddhist saying. It is a fact.

2) To speak and to listen, equally – When we have something to say, we should also listen to the response that we get. That is very important. Just to talk but then not pay attention to what the other person says is not okay. If we want the others to listen 100% to us, we need to reciprocate in the same way.

3) Courage to admit our own faults – Most of us can hardly accept that they have done something wrong. Even if deep down inside we know we are wrong, we can simply not say that it is so. I think that people who can acknowledge their mistakes without making excuses are

heroes. For example, I have a Tulku friend who loves to play cricket very much. But whenever he doesn't play so well, he finds something to blame it on. Either the bat is too heavy or the ground is not flat enough or whatever. He can never admit that he did something wrong.

The moment we can stand by our faults, a lot of problems and the negative emotions that go with them are brought to a halt before they get out of hand.

4) Benevolence – Here I am not even speaking of the mind of enlightenment, where we aspire to benefit all sentient beings. As a first step I mean just to be kind to the people we interact with on a regular basis like family members, friends, colleagues, neighbors etc. It is so important to cultivate warm-hearted relationships, where we are concerned with the well-being of the others and reduce our selfishness. Again acting in this way will reduce afflictive states of mind drastically.

5) Being able to bear difficulties –When we cannot have patience when we are in difficult situations, we often make them worse. There are a lot of people who get interested in Buddhism and then enthusiastically proclaim that they will practice Buddhism from now on until the end of time. But with the practice, some difficulties are bound to arise and being faced with them they immediately give up. Others are fascinated by some activity, find out everything about it and fully engage in it. But then if just one small thing happens against their wishes or expectations, they give it all up and blame everyone and everything for it except themselves. Acting this way, we will neither accomplish anything in a worldly context nor in a spiritual one.

We have a saying. We need to have a chest (also a synonym for courage) as wide as an ocean, which accommodates earth, water, stones, fish, jewels and also garbage. Everything fits. Similar to this we should have the inner space to deal with happiness, suffering, disappointments etc. If we have this confidence and courage to face patiently whatever happens in our life, a lot of problems will disappear quite naturally.

To heed these five points I have just mentioned, we don't need to study much, meditate or become learned in the different philosophical views. If we can just keep them in mind when we go about our daily lives, already we will have a lot less to struggle with. We can use them as guidelines to live by. As an example, if we drive a car according to the traffic rules, the traffic lights etc., we won't have many problems. Of course we might run out of gas or the engine breaks down. But the problems we might get with the traffic police or other drivers are reduced significantly as opposed to us just driving around mindlessly.

It is important that we don't think of a Buddhist practice as being something high and very difficult to do. We need to see how we can apply the teachings in our normal day-to-day lives, how they can help us to conduct ourselves in society and so on. Then it can help us to do better and eventually reduce our problems. That is my main point. Then we really practice Buddhism by getting rid of our mental afflictions through using our wisdom.

We need to develop our wisdom in order to uproot our negativities. The wisdom we need is the wisdom of selflessness. Whatever practice we engage in, it needs to be connected to it or else we, based on the Buddhist thought, we can never get to eliminate mental afflictions. As

Nagarjuna said, there is no other way than the realization of emptiness to overcome afflictions, which lie at the root of all suffering.

For example, when I see a mala and think of how beautiful it is, that I want it but don't have the money, I might want to steal it - all sorts of thoughts may come up. If at that moment I can use the five points I have just talked about, I will immediately recognize that trying to steal it would be wrong and I will refrain from it. At the same time I will also rid myself from all the problems that would come from stealing it. But still one might feel uneasy, because the wish to possess the mala has not been satisfied. This can be dissolved by applying the view of emptiness. Talking about contemplating emptiness, we should not just mouth the words, but use the five kinds of reasonings to examine that all phenomena are empty in nature. We don't necessarily need to be Buddhists to study and contemplate these reasonings. So when this thought arises of this being a nice mala, we can look where in fact this nice mala is. In the first bead or the second or in the thread that keeps it together. Then these nice-mala thoughts immediately crumble and with them also all the thoughts of wanting to have it. This is how contemplation on emptiness can benefit us in overcoming afflictive states of mind.

We can also use this line of reasoning when we become aware of thoughts like: 'I am so important. I am so good. I need this or that. I am suffering. I am facing all these problems.' Then we should look where this I is supposed to reside. The moment we understand that there is no I, all our problems vanish. The longer we remain in this understanding, the longer we are free from afflictions. The more we hold on to a solid perception of I, the more we will suffer. That is how meditating on emptiness can benefit us. It is also the state of mind in which we should meditate on deities, recite mantras, do yoga etc. This is why for some people problems dissolve when they meditate on deities or when they recite mantras. They enter into a subtle kind of consciousness, which transcends the crude kind of consciousness that is fiercely attached to an I.

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