

Meditating in the City

His Holiness the Sakya Trizin

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We humans require many things and have many things to accomplish. Yet it is clear that no matter how much we possess or where we are in our lives, we feel that there is not enough. There are always more things to want and new causes of dissatisfaction. Thus in our own experience, we can see the truth of Lord Buddha's teaching that samsara's entirety is nothing but suffering. So what we can do? Everyone wishes to be free from suffering and wishes to have happiness. This is common to all. For the sake of this happiness, everyone is making efforts in worldly, spiritual, or other ways. But no matter what we do, there is no end to suffering and dissatisfaction and no real gain of the happiness we are seeking.

How then can we acquire it? Lord Buddha teaches that every sentient being possesses buddha nature. The true nature of our minds is pure. Right from the beginning, it is never stained with obscurations of any form. This is why, if we try, we can attain

enlightenment. At the moment we do not see this buddha nature because it is completely covered with obscurations. But the obscurations are not within the nature of the mind. If they were, they could never be eliminated. For example, coal is by nature black and no matter how much you wash it, coal will never become white. On the other hand, a white cloth can have its whiteness obscured by dirt, but with correct methods we can wash it and then see its actual color. Similarly, the obscurations in our minds are only at the outer level, and with the right methods they can be eliminated. Therefore, if we work hard following the Dharma path, we can become fully enlightened Buddhas.

For these reasons, the most important thing is spiritual practice. All other things such as material wealth or power are only beneficial within this lifespan. On the day we leave this world, we will have to leave everything behind – our wealth, our friends, even our precious body. Only consciousness will be left, and when this happens, all that we can rely upon will be our spiritual practice.

Even when we face major problems in this life, there is a vast difference between the person who has spiritual ideas and the one who does not. When the person without any spiritual assistance faces such suffering, they are in a desperate situation and have

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to rely on wrong methods, perhaps taking extreme measures. One of the basic teachings of the Buddha is that everything created by causes and conditions is impermanent. Additionally, any actions connected with defilements cause suffering. Therefore, when we face problems, it is clear that that they are not anomalies that just happens to us. Rather, impermanence and suffering are the nature of existence itself.

Someone who understands this is more prepared to face problems. The problem itself, externally, might remain unchanged, but the suffering is reduced. A person who has spiritual assistance is better prepared to face a problem because he knows its true nature. This understanding lessens the mental burden, and when your mental burden is lessened, outer physical suffering diminishes. The mind is the boss and the body is like a servant. If the mind is happy, you could be in even the poorest conditions but still be happy. And if the mind is not happy, even if you have the best facilities, you will have a lot of misery. Since the mind is the most important factor to give us strength to face the challenges of suffering even in this life, the most important thing we can do is Dharma practice.

Although we are all human beings, each one of us has a different mind, different defilements, and so forth. In order to suit every level of our minds, the

Buddha bestowed an enormous number of teachings. One kind of teaching is not enough. Just as we require many medicines in order to cure the different types of disease, similarly in order to help limitless sentient beings, the Buddha gave many, many teachings. Generally speaking, there are two different types of followers: followers who wish to follow the smaller goal, and followers who wish to follow the greater goal. That is why we have the two yanas of Hinayana and Mahayana. Although the Hinayana path has many teachings, what in essence is most important is not to harm any sentient being. If you harm any sentient being, physically or mentally, it is not right.

The Mahayana path is not only to not harm beings but also to benefit them as much as one can because each and every sentient being is like oneself. From our own experience we can learn how much we wish to be free from suffering and wish to have happiness. From tiny insects to the most intelligent humans up to the deva realms, every sentient being has the same feeling: all wish to be free from suffering and to have happiness. It is not proper just to think of yourself, because you are just one person while others are countless. Between one and many, which is more important? The many is more important. Besides that, upon selfish thoughts good things never arise; only sufferings arise.

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Śāntideva said, “All sufferings in this universe come from caring for oneself.” If we think of ourselves, we have jealousy, pride, stinginess, desire, hatred, and so forth. All manner of impure thoughts arise, and any actions created with these impure thoughts create only suffering. Just as from a poisonous root anything that grows is poison, similarly any actions created from these defilements are only suffering. So when we think of ourselves only, all that we achieve is more suffering.

Śāntideva also said, “All happiness in this universe comes from wanting others to be happy.” If we wish others to be happy, then all good things and all good qualities come, just as if a root is medicinal, anything that grows from it is medicine. Similarly, on the basis of loving-kindness and compassion, if we want to help other sentient beings, any actions that we create produce happiness. That is why the root of the Mahayana teachings is loving-kindness and compassion. Therefore, we must try in every way to cultivate loving-kindness and compassion.

However, merely having compassion is not enough. We must rescue sentient beings from suffering and put them on the path of happiness. But at the moment we ourselves are not free. We do not have full knowledge or full power. We are completely bound by our own karma and defilements. So how

can we help? The sole most effective way to help sentient beings is to attain perfect enlightenment, because if we attain perfect enlightenment then even during a single moment we can rescue countless sentient beings.

This perfect enlightenment does not arise without proper causes and conditions, and they come from following the Mahayana path. The first step is to have a very sincere wish to attain perfect enlightenment. Then you must practice. The main goal of practice is to develop both method and wisdom. In order to fly, you need two wings, and, similarly, in order to attain enlightenment, you need two supports: the method to realize wisdom, and wisdom itself. These two depend on each other. Method means the accumulation of merit through generosity, moral conduct, patience, zeal, and concentration. Loving-kindness and compassion will only suppress faults, the chief of which is self-clinging. The methods only suppress self-clinging. In order to completely dig out the root of self-clinging, we require wisdom which completely eliminates it. To develop wisdom, we must have concentration. With these two together, we will be able to attain perfect enlightenment.

Many people say it is very difficult to practice Dharma, particularly in big cities where there is so much distraction and business to attend to. However,

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the Lord Buddha gave many teachings to help us tame our wild minds. Because our minds have been so thoroughly involved with defilements, we have been caught in the realm of existence and so we suffer. We have already suffered so much in the past, and we are still suffering. Furthermore, if we do not get to work now practicing the Dharma, we will continue to experience suffering ceaselessly. So therefore the Buddha gave teachings involving many different forms of practice, but all of them serve to tame our minds.

The Sanskrit word *dharma* has many different meanings, but the word generally means to change: to change our impure or wild mind that is so involved with defilements toward the right path. Although of course even just doing practice has some benefit, the point of practice is to change one's mind. If one's mind does not change, then it is not very effective. We must look to see whether the practices we are doing are making a real difference in our mind or not. If the practice changes our mind, then, if we use it in the right way, we could be the busiest person in the busiest city but still be a very good Dharma practitioner because everything we see and do, everyone we associate with, gives us a chance to practice Dharma.

For example, when traveling in cities and noticing many changes, we witness the truth of impermanence. When we see so much suffering, we are experiencing the Buddha's teaching that everything is suffering. The fact that we actually see it with our own naked eyes means we can immediately learn it. When we associate with the vast numbers of people in cities, we have a chance to help them, to practice compassion. When people disturb us or are angry with us, it gives us a chance to practice patience. In this way, if we can apply the teachings to our everyday life, then wherever we are, at work or at home, we can use our experiences and surroundings to practice the Dharma.

These different experiences can help us to understand more deeply how important it is to practice the Dharma. Higher meditations like concentration and insight are very important, but in order to reach that level, it is necessary to cultivate the basic foundations such as contemplating the difficulty of obtaining the precious human birth, impermanence and death, the cause of karma, and the suffering of samsara – the four common foundations. These you can learn from a teacher and read about in books.

However, just gaining knowledge is not enough. If we have held the relevant knowledge for a long time, but it has not worked a change within us, then we

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will remain the same person. We will have the same anger, and we will be unable to proceed in the Dharma. Although we might have heard about the difficulties of obtaining a precious human birth a hundred times, if it has not made a change in us, if we remain on the same level with the same defilements, then this means that we are not really practicing. Why is this so? Because we are not really experiencing it.

Thus we see that knowing about the Dharma and experiencing it through contemplation are two very different things. You may know many teachings, but if you do not practice them, if you do not use them in your daily life, then this is not right. For example, the purpose of making delicious food is to eat it. If you make it but you do not eat it, there is no point. Similarly, knowing the Dharma only matters when we utilize it in our daily life. To do this, we have to use many different methods, including our daily experiences.

With these basic foundations, if we understand everything we see not only as a teaching but as a spur toward an inner feeling, a spiritual urge, then we will not be wasting our time. We will definitely make every effort, just as people in prison constantly have only one thought: "When can I get out of this place?" When you have this real, sincere desire to practice the

Dharma, then your inner, higher meditations will generally arise.

First, having the basic foundations depends on our merit. Due to having accumulated merit in past lives, we have been born as human beings in this life, we have had the good fortune to hear the Dharma, and we have had a chance to practice it. Similarly, having a real inner feeling about spiritual practice depends on the merit that we have accumulated. So we must accumulate merit through prayers, devotion to the guru and to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and through practicing loving-kindness and compassion toward all sentient beings. In this way, as our merit increases, our wisdom also increases, and these two grow together. When merit is fully built up, the wisdom will also come, and with merit and wisdom together you will be able to succeed on the path.



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