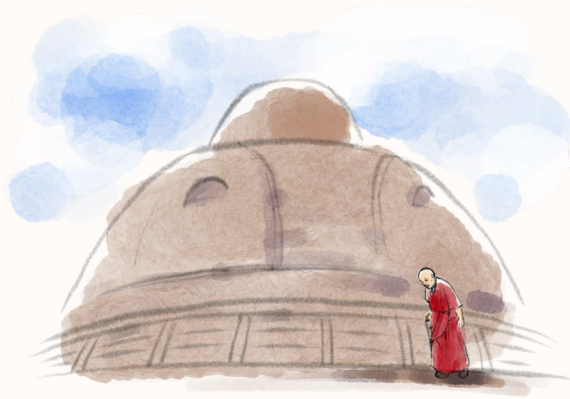




**A LIFE OF
HAPPINESS**
**A PRACTICE GUIDE
FOR OLDER PRACTITIONERS**
by the Ninth Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche

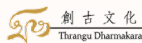


A LIFE OF HAPPINESS

A PRACTICE GUIDE FOR OLDER PRACTITIONERS

OFFERED BY THE
NINTH KHENCHEN THRANGU RINPOCHE

TRANSLATED BY
JAMYANG WOSER



DHARMAKARA
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A FORTUNATE NEW ERA FOR THE ELDERLY

FOREWORD BY THE SEVENTEENTH GYALWANG KARMAPA

WHEN WE THINK ABOUT AGING, it often feels like life will become dark and gloomy. As people are having fewer children nowadays, many countries in the world have increasingly aging populations. As a result, substantial resources are directed at better understanding and care for the elderly. I believe that, not far from now, older populations will experience life much more differently than before. They will have greater visibility within society, and we will approach a new, vibrant era for the elderly.

In this book *A Life of Happiness: A Practice Guide for Older Practitioners*, Thrangu Rinpoche writes, “Being able to live into old age is actually a remarkably fortunate thing.” Similarly, and especially in this era, if we are able to grow old, encounter the dharma, and begin our practice, there could be nothing more fortunate than this.

I have the frequent opportunity of encountering elderly Tibetans who make the long journey from Tibet to come to meet me in India. They often think of it as a once in a lifetime occasion when they meet me, but the requests they make set them apart from others. They only say to me, “May there be peace in the world!” I am always deeply touched by moments like these, and it reminds me of my maternal grandmother.

My maternal grandmother was blind, but she was always very dedicated to spinning a prayer wheel while reciting the heart mantra of Chenrezig. Although she couldn’t see, in my memories she always had a smile on her face and was happy. Whether it is my grandmother or other elderly Tibetans, I believe they are able to remain pure-hearted, happy, and contented in their old age due to having the dharma in their hearts.

Thrangu Rinpoche is my main tutor, and a spiritual teacher endowed with both knowledge and practice, esteemed by the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. This book, *A Life of Happiness: A Practice Guide for Older Practitioners*, is the first introductory practice guide intended for older people. The methods of practice that Rinpoche explains here are easy to understand, yet extremely important and pithy.

Rinpoche's lifetime of pure and genuine practice is distilled into such concise words here, and I believe that each word and sentence embodies deep wishes and blessings from Rinpoche. For the readers who are able to encounter the dharma due to this book, I wish that you will be endowed with unparalleled enjoyment in your old age and live a life of happiness!

The Seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje
March 2017

A JOYOUS ASPIRATION

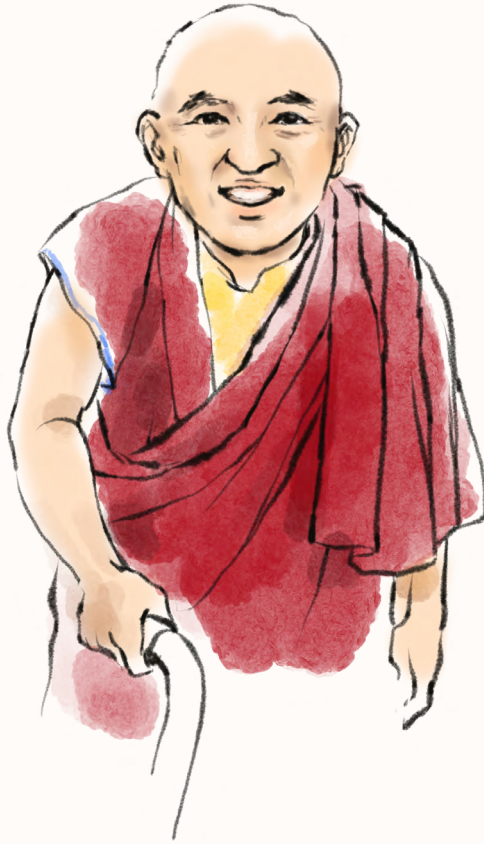
PREFACE BY KHENCHEN THRANGU RINPOCHE

I PRAY THAT THIS BOOK may benefit all beings in finding joy and happiness, especially those who are old, the sick, and their family members. I hope that the concise reminders and advice found in this book may be beneficial for all. I will also continue praying for everyone.

Tashi Delek!

Thrangu Rinpoche
Thrangu Monastery in Vancouver, Canada¹
15 October 2016

1 This book is based on an interview with Thrangu Rinpoche held in October 2016 at Thrangu Monastery, Canada.



ONE:
THE MEANING OF AGING

THE GOOD FORTUNE OF AGING

If we consider it carefully, being able to live into old age is actually a remarkably fortunate thing. If we had died while we were young, we wouldn't have had the chance to grow old.

Presently, in the 21st century, many countries have aging societies and an increase in older members in the population. Although it is true that older people's thinking differs from the rest of the population, it would be quite pointless to believe that we are no longer useful and just feel sorry for ourselves. Why is this so? If we consider it carefully, being able to live into old age is actually a remarkably fortunate thing. If we had died while we were young, we wouldn't have had the chance to grow old.

NOW IS THE BEST TIME TO PRACTICE

We might not have had too much time to encounter the dharma and practice when we were younger. Perhaps we had to work hard

to make a living and feed our families. Nevertheless, this period of toil has passed. Now that we are older and have retired, we have more opportunities to connect with and practice the dharma. We have more time to learn the dharma that benefits both current and future lifetimes. Thus, we need to really seize this opportunity and work hard at it. We can recite more prayers and do more good deeds, and especially practice the dharma diligently!

We should think about aging in this positive way. If we examine our lives properly, we are not the only ones getting old; every single person in this world ages. It is an undeniable fact of life that we cannot change. Therefore, we need to make full use of this opportunity to practice the dharma. Doing so will definitely bring about results.

EXPERIENCE IS THE MOST PRECIOUS ASSET

If you are older now, you have probably experienced many ups and downs and have some life experience to share with younger people. You can tell them about your successes and failures and what attitudes they should take towards achievements and challenges. Remind them not to give in to jealousy and pride when they enjoy moments of success, and not to become devastated and succumb to life's failures.

Encourage youth to really think for themselves. As an older person, it is your responsibility to share your precious experience. No matter if they take it to heart or not, based on a virtuous motivation, you have to share your experience with your children or other young people. View it as your responsibility to provide advice.

EVERYONE AGES

Now that our worldly concerns in this life are coming to an end, we should be grateful for this invaluable chance to grow old. We should regard this as a wonderful thing and be joyful and happy. We are all similar in the fact that everyone in the world ages, so we should be grateful for being able to live to a ripe old age! Thinking like this is not only beneficial for our bodies, but it also allows us to feel more relaxed mentally. It has great benefits for both mind and body.

We should do prostrations or circumambulate stupas whenever we can. This is both a form of dharma practice and a type of physical exercise. If feelings of jealousy, pride, anger, or sadness arise, we must carefully examine them and realize their faults. We need to frequently remind ourselves how fortunate we are to have obtained a precious human body and to have engaged in the study of the dharma!

MY LONGEVITY COMES FROM BLESSINGS

I personally believe that being able to live to this age is entirely due to the blessings of the Sixteenth Karmapa and White Tara. Although I face many difficulties in my old age, I am still able to live happily without worries.

It is such a fortunate thing to be able to grow old! There is a saying from my hometown, “A person’s youth is in their fifties.” From my own experience, I feel that this is rather true.

I did not feel old when I reached fifty. I only felt a little older when I reached sixty, and a lot more so when I got to seventy. Now that I am eighty years old, I feel more significant and rapid changes. It is as if I can feel my body’s condition differ from month to month now.



THE KARMAPA SAID, “YOU MUST PRACTICE WHITE TARA”

When I was around eleven or twelve years old, I travelled from Yushu, Qinghai, with my teacher and family to meet the Sixteenth Karmapa at Tsurphu monastery. At that time, both the Karmapa and I were really young. My family hoped that I could receive an empowerment from the Karmapa, so we made requests and asked him which yidam deity I should practice.

The Sixteenth Karmapa told me, “In order to lead a long life, you should practice White Tara”, and gave me the White Tara empo-

werment. Afterwards, I went on a White Tara retreat at Tsurphu monastery for about a month.

I received this precious opportunity due to the kindness of the Sixteenth Karmapa. I remember he also told me, “Spiritual teachers, tulkus, and Rinpoches must lead long lives. They are responsible for spreading the dharma and benefitting sentient beings, so they need to have longevity in order to carry out their activities.”

Everyone grows old, although I do feel that I am a little too old at this point. I personally believe that being able to live to this age is entirely due to the blessings of the Sixteenth Karmapa and White Tara. Although I face many difficulties in my old age, I am still able to live happily without worries.

THE VARIOUS ILLNESSES IN MY LIFE

I have experienced many illnesses in this life. For example, I once had an abscess growing on my leg, and I also recently underwent knee surgery. I had a difficult time adjusting to the environment when I moved to Sikkim, India from Kham, Tibet. Exacerbated by the poor health care services, I became quite sick at that time. Gradually, I recovered after lengthy treatment with Tibetan medicine.

A few years ago, my eye pressure got really high. The condition was rather severe, and I felt that I might be dying soon.

Right now, the biggest discomfort in my body is with my knees. It is not so easy for me to walk, and they really hurt sometimes. After my knee operation, the doctor said I would need to do physical therapy and exercises for quite a long time. My attendants remind me to do these particular exercises and poses, but sometimes I get really bored with them. It is as if I have nothing else to do but walk around, back and forth, all day.

During my stay in Sikkim, there was a businessman called Dawa Tsering who also underwent knee surgery. The doctor instructed him to do physical therapy after the surgery, but he said, “I had an operation in order to heal my knees. Now that it’s over, my knees should be all good to go. There’s no need to do any therapy.” He thought like this and refused to do any rehabilitation, and eventually lost the ability to walk. He passed away soon after. When I think about him, I am reminded to heed the doctor’s instructions and stick to the exercises diligently.

ACCEPTANCE OF AGING ITSELF IS WONDERFUL

For an older person, walking is more difficult. We tend to have aches in our bodies, our feet and so forth. Putting on or button-

ing a shirt used to be such a simple task. Now that we are older, our shaky hands make fastening a button a tedious challenge. Older people have trouble sleeping too. Sometimes when I suffer from insomnia, I get up early and use the extra time for practice.

We may feel unwell and our abilities, such as walking, might deteriorate by the month, but we should not allow ourselves to feel overwhelmed or upset by our condition. Even though we experience this process of aging, it is important to think of it as a positive thing. Even if we have only one month left to live, we should enthusiastically seize this opportunity to recite prayers, accumulate merit, and do our practices.

MINDSET DETERMINES HOW WE AGE

Keep a cheerful, calm state of mind. Try not to overthink when we are unhappy. This is beneficial to both our body and mind, and helps to slow down the aging process.

Elderly Tibetans often circle stupas and make prostrations. This is a kind of dharma practice, and also a type of physical exercise. Due to cultural differences, elderly populations elsewhere have different habits and customs. However, I think the main difference lies in whether or not they have encountered the dharma.

WAVE GOODBYE TO NEGATIVE THINKING

Generally, in their spare time, Buddhists listen to the teachings or stay at home to practice or recite prayers, so they don't easily become upset. Elderly non-Buddhists mostly reside in places without the dharma or do not have the chance to learn about the dharma. Even though they might lead comfortable lives, they tend to have

more negative thinking. Once they retire and have nothing to do, they tend to feel more bored and lonely.

The most important thing for older people is to not be pessimistic. We should not constantly think, “Oh, I am too old. I am really struggling a lot” and focus solely on negative things.

We should often be cautious not to give rise to thoughts of jealousy, pride, and anger. When they do arise, we have to realize that these negative thoughts are of no use to us.

Older people in different situations experience distinct afflictions and suffering. For example, some have more anger and are short-tempered, others suffer more from physical pain. Fortunately, there are ways to face all these afflictions and suffering.

AFFLICTIONS ALSO DEPEND ON CONDITIONS

According to the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, there are three causes for the afflictions to arise: not abandoning the kernels of the afflictions, the object being present, and inappropriate attention. An older person with more anger in them, for example, has not abandoned the kernel of anger. When they see an object that angers them, they develop inappropriate attention. This means that they persistently think about the person who angered them and

the terrible things that person has done. They feel this way even if the person never directly harmed them, due to the influence of inappropriate attention.

Afflictions arise when the causes and conditions, namely the kernels, object, and inappropriate attention are present. We can handle the situation by thinking logically, approaching it from an objective and positive perspective. The person who angered us might have had no alternative, which is something with which we can empathize. We ourselves probably also behaved wrongly at that time. Using a logical approach, based on reasoning, helps to diminish our anger, and makes it easier for us to cultivate loving-kindness and compassion. This practice is suitable for older people with more anger in them.

CULTIVATE DEVOTION TOWARDS THE DHARMA

Some of us experience mental suffering, but constantly feeling sorry for ourselves is not constructive. We should consider the fact that there are many people in this world suffering just like we are. We are not the only ones experiencing pain.

We should try to think about what we can do to alleviate the pain of others. We can recite prayers and make dedications for them.

Thinking and practicing like this also reduces our own worries and suffering.

In general, we should try to cultivate devotion towards the dharma. We can do things like reciting prayers, circling stupas, and meditating to help us develop devotion.

In a way, we can say that people living in Asia are very fortunate. Although it is rare to find stupas in most places, they can visit monasteries, meditate there, and make offerings and aspirations, which are all excellent practices.

In addition, some older people may suffer from serious illnesses and experience various physical discomforts. They should make use of the opportunity to pray to the Medicine Buddha, practice his sadhana, and recite his mantra.

FEELING JOY TOWARDS AGING

As an older person, I make a habit of reminding myself that being able to age like this is such a wonderful and fortunate thing. It is proof of my longevity. We should make use of our precious time to practice the dharma.

We need to be optimistic and joyful and remind ourselves that not everyone is able to live as long as we have. This is not easy to achieve, so we must treasure our aging process and give rise to inner joy.

Keep a cheerful, calm state of mind. Try not to overthink when we are unhappy. This is beneficial to both our body and mind, and helps to slow down the aging process. A body and mind that is calm and cheerful is extremely beneficial to us.

YOU ARE NEVER TOO OLD TO LEARN

Dharma practice makes a person calm and peaceful. We are often caught up in the sway of the afflictions. Ignorance, anger, jealousy, and desire not only cause mental suffering, they are also unhealthy for our bodies. The key to solving these problems lies in practicing the dharma.

The first of the six perfections (paramitas) is generosity. Generosity can be divided into three types: giving wealth, giving freedom from fear, and giving dharma. The first refers to giving away material things. Giving freedom from fear refers to the practice of life release. The third and most important of these three is giving dharma. We receive great benefit even if we have only listened to a bit of dharma and have had some positive experiences.

I often think, if only the terrorists who carried out the September 11th attacks had been introduced to the dharma. If only a lama or lay practitioner had explained to them how killing that many peo-

ple was intrinsically wrong. If they had listened, then things might have turned out very differently. However, they had no one to tell them about the dharma and they were driven by their anger. Not only did they lose their own lives, so many others were killed and hurt by their actions. Therefore, I believe that it is important to talk about the dharma. We should study thoroughly so that we are able to tell more people about it in the future.

Dharma practice makes a person calm and peaceful. We are often caught up in the sway of the afflictions. Ignorance, anger, jealousy, and desire not only cause mental suffering, they are also unhealthy for our bodies. The key to solving these problems lies in practicing the dharma.

HOW TO PRACTICE THE DHARMA

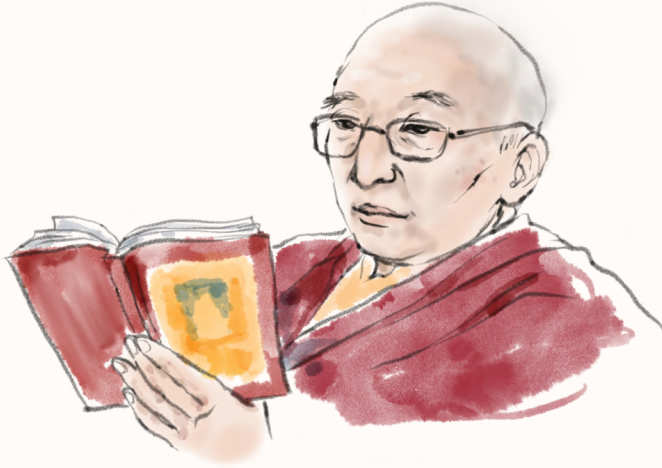
How should we practice the dharma? The Buddha once gave an essential teaching:

Commit not a single unwholesome action,
Cultivate a wealth of virtue,
Tame completely this mind of ours —
This is the Buddha's teaching.

This verse mentions three key points. The first is to abandon non-virtue, and the second is to accumulate virtue, as much as possible. The third is to tame our mind and not be disturbed by the afflictions. The essence of dharma is to abandon the ten non-virtues and adopt the ten virtues; the root of this is taming one's own mind. Therefore, we need to constantly check our minds to see whether there is anger, jealousy, pride and so forth. In order to do so, we need to be endowed with awareness, mindfulness, and carefulness.

To practice mindfulness and awareness is to constantly observe what we are thinking and doing. It can be hard for us to know when afflictions like desire, anger, and delusion arise, so we need to check for their presence through the aid of mindfulness and awareness. To be careful is to remind ourselves to be cautious when we realize that our afflictions have arisen. We need to carefully maintain a virtuous motivation. Being mindful and aware in this way, while reciting the Chenrezig mantra, is an excellent practice.

The three key points essentially teach us that we can understand the dharma in two ways: through attending dharma teachings and through reading dharma texts.



THE SPIRITUAL TEACHER THAT IS ALWAYS AVAILABLE

When we attend dharma teachings, some of us can understand, but others may not be able to. The teacher giving the teachings may also be available to answer questions only during certain times. In addition, we might only understand some parts of the teachings but not others. We encounter these situations when we study the dharma through attending teachings. However, this is not so much the case if we rely on the written word, for example Buddhist texts, because we can read them slowly and contemplate the meaning repeatedly. This is why I believe that publishing Buddhist texts is extremely important.

In terms of studying the dharma in the long-run, although we can follow teachers, lamas, and lay practitioners, they may not always be available when we need them. On the other hand, we can read books whenever we need to. In this way, these Buddhist texts are actually our spiritual teachers. Whenever we are free or the desire arises, we can pick up a book from the shelves to read and study. Whether it is prior to bedtime, before or after a meal, or while taking a break from work, texts are readily available to us.

SANSKRIT SCRIPTURES ARE PRESERVED IN TIBETAN

In recent years, many prominent teachers have visited English-speaking communities to give teachings. Numerous skilled translators have also translated many scriptures from Tibetan to English. We should spend more time reading them whenever we can. Perhaps we won't be able to understand much the first time through, but after reading them a few more times, we will. Once we understand the meaning, it will help us to develop devotion towards the Dharma.

Nowadays, many teachers and lamas who are giving teachings know English. However, students should not be overly dependent on them. They should also try to learn the Tibetan language. Why

should we do so? Tibet used to be quite underdeveloped; fundamental infrastructure like transportation and such were not well developed. But during the reigns of the Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo and the three ‘dharma kings’ (Trisong Gampo, Trisong Deutsen, Tri Ralpachan), many highly-skilled Tibetan translators painstakingly undertook and completed the translation of Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit to Tibetan.

For the sake of the dharma, Tibetan kings during the Early Transmission period exhausted huge amounts of money and effort to translate the scriptures. Although there was no support from the kings of the Later Transmission period, from the 8th to 10th centuries, Nalanda and Vikramashila universities in India were at their peak, housing numerous prominent scholars and yogis. Through sheer determination, the Tibetan translators traveled to these universities and listened, contemplated, and meditated on the dharma, and then eventually translated the Sanskrit scriptures into Tibetan.

These translated scriptures have been carefully preserved up until the present. Although Buddhism in India has deteriorated and the use of Sanskrit is on the decline, those ancient texts are still wholly intact and preserved in Tibetan. Thus, studying Tibetan is highly beneficial towards reading the ancient Sanskrit scriptures.

STUDYING TIBETAN FOR THE SAKE OF DHARMA

To study Tibetan in hopes of gaining financial profit is rather pointless. It would be best if we could have a correct motivation behind our study of Tibetan. Likewise, it would also be wonderful to provide financial support to those who are studying the language. I remember once, while I was teaching in Taiwan, I spoke in Tibetan and my translator was a Westerner who translated into English. We had another Chinese translator who then translated the English into Chinese. I felt it was slightly unfortunate that it had to happen like that, since Tibetans and Chinese share a more similar cultural environment. It would have been better if the Tibetan had been translated directly into Chinese.

In Chinese Buddhism, there are many exceptional translators who traveled and studied in India, and subsequently translated the Sanskrit scriptures into Chinese. We can also study these thoroughly. I hear that Classical Chinese is used in these texts, which can be difficult for people nowadays to read. Tibetan, on the other hand, has not undergone much change over the centuries; if we were to learn Tibetan, it would be helpful for reading and understanding the scriptures. Even if we are not proficient in it, it would be wonderful if we could understand basic terms like *konchok sum* (the Three Jewels) or *parchin druk* (six paramitas). What I mean here is that learning Tibetan for the sake of dharma is extremely meaningful!



Two:
DHARMA PRACTICES FOR
OLDER PRACTITIONERS

THE FOUNDATIONS

When we find ourselves unable to take our study of the dharma seriously, meditating on impermanence will make us realize that we need to practice the dharma. Even after we have started practicing the dharma, sometimes we get lazy and are unable to focus on the practice. Meditating on impermanence will then encourage us to become very diligent.

Are human beings capable of practicing the dharma? Yes, we are, because we have gained a precious human birth. Within the six realms of existence — gods, demigods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings — only humans are able to truly practice the dharma. This is due to our precious human birth with all its freedoms and endowments. Other sentient beings, such as animals, do not enjoy the same excellent opportunity as we do. Not only are we able to practice the dharma, our everyday life is also of a higher quality than beings in other realms.

Although we do need to work hard at our worldly affairs, life will become meaningless if we are overly attached to them. They are of no benefit whatsoever after we die and become a corpse. Billionaires are unable to take any possessions with them when they die; kings, ministers, and officials have no power at all when facing death.

Therefore, we should practice the dharma. Out of all the realms of beings, only humans are able to practice, so we really need to put some effort into it. In this way, we will be able to benefit both ourselves and all other sentient beings. We must not waste this life. Doing so would mean wasting a precious human birth that is incredibly difficult to obtain; this opportunity is not something we can obtain with ease, so we really need to cherish it.

IMPERMANENCE AS INSPIRATION

The Buddhist texts say that, “In the beginning, impermanence helps us to enter the gates of dharma. In the middle, it is the whip that makes us practice with diligence.” Although meditating on impermanence is not necessarily enjoyable or delightful, it is extremely beneficial towards our dharma practice.

When we find ourselves unable to take our study of the dharma seriously, meditating on impermanence will make us realize that we need to practice the dharma. Even after we have started practicing the dharma, sometimes we get lazy and are unable to focus on the practice. Meditating on impermanence will then encourage us to become very diligent.

What benefits can we expect to get at the end if we continue with this practice? As the text continues, “In the end, meditating on impermanence is the companion for attaining the result.” We will eventually realize that meditating on impermanence will help us obtain the result of our practice. This is why we need to meditate on impermanence often.

OBSERVING IMPERMANENCE IN DAILY LIFE

The great Milarepa once said, “I have not read the words of the teachings, because all phenomena are the teachings.” To meditate on impermanence, we do not have to solely rely on the study of texts and treatises. We can actually do so by observing the changes in exterior phenomena.

Let us take the example of the changing seasons: winter turns into spring, spring turns into summer, summer turns into autumn, and

autumn turns into winter. We can also observe impermanence when day becomes night. We see it in plants, as they blossom and eventually wither away. We can also experience impermanence when natural disasters of the four elements occur, such as earthquakes, floods, fires, and storms.

I think that the best way to experience impermanence nowadays is to turn on the television. The daily news constantly reports various disasters unfolding around the world, persistently reminding us of impermanence. These are all examples of ways we can meditate on impermanence.

CHANGE IS THE ONLY CONSTANT IN LIFE

Impermanence can be classified in two ways: the impermanence of the external world and the environment, and the impermanence of its inhabitants. The way to meditate on the impermanence of the external world is mentioned above, by observing changes in outer phenomena like the changing seasons. We can meditate on the impermanence of the sentient beings within it through our experience of family and friends passing away. For example, some people die in childhood or in their youth. There is also the process of aging, as we grow up into adulthood and beyond. These are all

events happening in our own lives, through which we can experience impermanence.

Impermanence pervades the external world and the sentient beings within it. Everything is gradually changing. This is something we can see and experience all the time. Impermanence of the outer world refers to the changes that all phenomena undergo without exception. Impermanence of inner sentient beings is the process of birth, aging, sickness, and death. We can look around us to see how many people are ill, getting older, dying, and being born. Whether human or animal, existence is preserved through the cycle of birth and death in every generation. This is the situation of the world that we live in.

LIFE IS LIKE A BUBBLE

There is a verse from the four preliminary practices that states:

Second, the world and its sentient inhabitants are all
transient.

Especially, beings' lives are like water bubbles —
Who knows when I will die and become a corpse?
Since dharma will help then, I'll practice diligently.

Impermanence can also be split into gross and subtle impermanence. Subtle impermanence refers to the process of infinitesimal changes that all phenomena undergo. For example, the earth and our bodies change from moment to moment. A newborn baby slowly grows into a child, and gradually blossoms into adulthood. Eventually, they turn into a grey-haired old person. These changes don't occur in a day; they happen gradually, second by second, day by day, and month by month. The Southern tradition of Buddhism utilizes this concept to meditate on impermanence.

Even though all phenomena change from moment to moment, the main method of meditating on impermanence in Tibetan Buddhism is to reflect on gross impermanence — the changes which are immediately obvious. This method helps to decrease our attachment to this life. The primary reason that we are unable to practice with diligence is because we are overly preoccupied with this life. We believe that this particular life is extremely important, so we are unable to abandon non-virtues and practice virtues. If we want to be free from afflictions and suffering, we need to meditate on gross impermanence. As mentioned in the verse “Second, the world and its sentient inhabitants are all transient,” we need to meditate on both the impermanence of the world and sentient beings.

A human life is like a water bubble, which might burst and disappear at any moment. Some people might still be talking in one moment, but gone in the next. We might also meet with fatal accidents at work. Some people pass away after struggling for months with an illness, while others die of old age. There are also those who die in childhood and so forth. This is why the verse likens our life-force to a bubble; our lives really are as fragile as a water bubble.

“Who knows when I will die and become a corpse?” means that it is difficult to predict when we will die. It could be months or years away; we can’t know for sure. When we die, the body just becomes a lifeless corpse. We really take such good care of our bodies while alive, adorning them with beautiful clothing and feeding them delicious food. But when we die, they merely become corpses. At the time of death, dharma is the only thing that benefits us.

The last line says, “Since dharma will help then, I’ll practice diligently.” The only thing that benefits this life is the dharma. If we practice well in this life, it will help us to obtain a rebirth in the higher realms, allowing us to encounter the dharma once again, or we can take rebirth in a pure realm. All of this depends on being diligent in our practice. The dharma is something that benefits both ourselves and others, so we should practice its teachings diligently.

WHEN IMPERMANENCE MANIFESTS

As humans, we are actually more capable of understanding impermanence due to our shorter life spans. It is also difficult to predict when we will fall sick or die. We often spend our time worrying about things like getting sick, dying, or our family members dying. Nevertheless, it is through these worries that we can develop a deeper understanding of impermanence.

Even though we encounter many instances of impermanence in our lives, it can still be hard to remember impermanence, even as we grow older. It would be helpful to our dharma practice if we could meditate on it frequently. This is why we need to constantly remind ourselves that we are unable to take with us anything from this world, including our possessions, family, and friends.

Impermanence is not something that only older people have to meditate on. Every single person in the world has to face it, so we all need to meditate on impermanence. By thinking in this way, we won't feel alone because we are not the only ones facing it.

LOVING-KINDNESS AND COMPASSION

*If we take advantage of others for the sake of our own happiness,
we will be the only ones who are happy while others suffer.
Building our own happiness upon someone else's pain contradicts
the practice of loving-kindness and compassion.*

Loving-kindness and compassion are very important in both dharma practice and everyday life. Loving-kindness is the wish for sentient beings to obtain happiness, while compassion is wanting them to be free from suffering.

ELIMINATING SELF-GRASPING

Generally, we have a mind that clings to a self, and this is known as self-grasping. It makes us feel as though we are really important, that we have to become happier than other people. Is it wrong to think in this way?

There is nothing particularly bad about thinking like this. However, if we take advantage of others for the sake of our own happiness, we will be the only ones who are happy while others suffer. Building our own happiness upon someone else's pain contradicts the practice of loving-kindness and compassion.

How can we cultivate loving-kindness and compassion? We need to remove self-grasping and to love others as if they were ourselves. We can use our own experience as an example. When we are sick, worried, exhausted, aging, or under the sway of the afflictions, we seek relief from these sufferings. Likewise, other people do not wish to suffer. Similarly, they also want to experience happiness.

This is the reason why we should not harm or inflict pain on others. Instead, we should be kind towards people and help them obtain happiness.

EQUALIZING SELF AND OTHERS

We can also practice equalizing self and others and exchanging self and others to cultivate a mind that cherishes others more than ourselves. This helps us to develop loving-kindness and compassion. To equalize self and others is to understand that all other sentient beings are exactly the same as we are in wanting to be happy

and free from suffering. This is why sentient beings (others) and ourselves (self) are equal.

We should let go of the self-clinging that considers only ourselves as important, and abandon thinking that other people don't matter as much. This method of training our thinking is the practice of equalizing self and others.

EXCHANGING SELF AND OTHERS

The practice of exchanging self and others is to put ourselves in someone else's position — to regard ourselves as others, and others as ourselves.

When we have feelings of jealousy or arrogance towards another person, how would we feel if we were that person? If we were to become the despised object of suspicion and jealousy, how would we feel?

We can tame our afflictions by meditating on exchanging self and others. Gradually, we will be able to cultivate loving-kindness and compassion towards others.

RECITATION OF MANTRAS

When we recite the Mani mantra, we need to visualize Chenrezig (Avalokiteshvara) actually present in front of us. Even though we can't really see him, his wisdom mind is always protecting us.

The mantra commonly recited in Tibet is the six-syllable mantra of Chenrezig — OM MAṆI PADME HŪṂ.

THE MANI MANTRA

There are six syllables to the mantra OM MAṆI PADME HŪṂ. Sometimes an additional HRĪḤ is added, becoming OM MAṆI PADME HŪṂ HRĪḤ.

The syllable HRĪḤ embodies the wisdom of Chenrezig's mind. Generally, we speak of the Three Protectors: Manjushri who represents wisdom, Chenrezig who represents love and compassion, and Vajrapani who represents power. The HRĪḤ syllable in the

mantra represents the wisdom of the mind of Chenrezig, signifying the loving-kindness and compassion that seeks to benefit every sentient being. This is why we sometimes recite HRĪḤ at the end.

Different teachers teach it differently; that is why there are two ways to recite the six-syllable mantra. But no matter if you recite it as OM MAṆI PADME HŪṀ or OM MAṆI PADME HŪṀ HRĪḤ, there is no difference to the benefits of recitation.

SUPPLICATION TO CHENREZIG

There are two different explanations of the meaning behind the six-syllable mantra.

The first explanation is that the syllable OM consists of the three sounds *a-u-m*, which respectively represent body, speech, and mind. Thus, OM is a combination of these three sounds.

MAṆI means jewel; it represents the wisdom of Chenrezig's mind.

PADME means lotus. Although the plant grows from the mud, the flowers are pure and untainted. When practicing the dharma, we need to know what should be cultivated and abandoned. MAṆI (jewel) represents cultivating the ten virtues and realizing the state of Buddhahood; PADME (lotus) represents abandoning the ten

non-virtues and giving up all negative deeds. MAṆI PADME (jewel lotus) is another name for the bodhisattva Chenrezig.

Why do we include the name of Chenrezig in the six-syllable mantra? We usually call out the person's name if we are seeking their help. Likewise, when we are asking for the help and blessings of Chenrezig, we recite his name while praying.

The last syllable HŪṂ represents the end of a sentence.

SIX REALMS OF REBIRTH AS SIX AFFLICTIONS

Another explanation states that the six-syllable mantra represents liberating the six classes of sentient beings from the six realms of samsara. The six realms of samsara exist as a result of the six types of affliction that sentient beings have. We recite the six-syllable mantra in order to liberate all beings from the sufferings of the six realms.

The first class of sentient beings is the gods. We take rebirth in the god realms because we are unable to abandon pride. By reciting the syllable OM, we can remove this pride so that we won't have to take rebirth in the god realms. The worst suffering as a god is the pain of knowing that death is impending. Reciting this syllable helps to remove this kind of suffering.

MA represents removing the suffering of demigods (asuras). We are reborn as demigods due to intense feelings of jealousy. Their biggest suffering is the quarrelling and fights they have with the gods spurred by jealousy. We recite the syllable MA to remove this kind of suffering.

The syllable NI represents the suffering humans experience. We are reborn as humans due to having desire and attachment. Birth, aging, sickness, and death are the main types of suffering that humans experience. We recite the syllable NI to remove desire, so that sentient beings won't take rebirth as humans and experience the suffering of birth, aging, sickness, and death.

PAD represents the suffering of the animal realms. We are reborn as animals due to ignorance. Reciting the syllable PAD removes ignorance so that we won't be reborn there, and it helps to remove the suffering of ignorance experienced in the animal realms.

ME represents the suffering in the hungry ghost realms. We take rebirth there due to stinginess. Their biggest suffering is hunger and thirst. Reciting ME removes stinginess, and also relieves beings in the hungry ghost realms of the suffering of hunger and thirst.

HŪM represents the suffering in the hell realms. We take rebirth there due to anger, and beings in the hell realms experience the un-

bearable pain of heat and cold. Reciting the syllable HŪṂ removes anger and the suffering of the hell realms.

Therefore, the second explanation shows that the six-syllable mantra can remove the suffering of the six realms.

MAY THE BODHISATTVAS ALWAYS PROTECT US

There are many methods to meditate on Chenrezig. For example, we can meditate on the thousand-armed Chenrezig. His thousand arms signify a thousand wheel-turning kings (*chakravarti-rāja*), and his thousand eyes signify the thousand buddhas of the fortunate eon. We can also pray to him for protection.

We can also choose to do the more common meditation on the four-armed Chenrezig. His four arms signify the four activities of pacifying, enriching, magnetizing, and subjugating. *Pacifying* refers to the quelling of all suffering. *Enriching* refers to the increase of life-force and merit. *Magnetizing* is to attract sentient beings and wealth. *Subjugating* means to remove all obstacles and unfavorable conditions.

The recitation of OM MAṆI PADME HŪṂ in Tibetan and the Chinese recitation of Guanyin are basically the same.

When we recite the Mani mantra, we need to do so while visualizing Chenrezig actually present in front of us. Even though we can't really see him, his wisdom mind is always protecting us.

It would be truly wonderful if we could recite the six-syllable mantra as often as possible. We usually talk about a type of liberation called *liberation upon seeing* (Tib: *tongdrol*), which means that we are able to arouse devotion and derive benefit upon seeing images in monasteries. There is another kind of liberation called *liberation upon hearing* (Tib: *tödrol*), which means that we can receive benefit upon hearing mantras or the names of the buddhas. Therefore, reciting mantras and visiting monasteries is highly beneficial to our dharma practice.

PRACTICE DURING TIMES OF SICKNESS

*May everyone in the world be free from sickness.
May no new diseases appear in this world.
May the sick be cured of their illnesses,
and may the healthy never become sick.*

In the *Kangyur* section of the Tibetan Buddhist canon, there are two series of texts regarding the Medicine Buddha. One of them is only about the Medicine Buddha himself, while the other mentions the eight Medicine Buddhas. According to these texts, the Medicine Buddha made twelve great aspirations to free sentient beings from various illnesses, to free them from suffering and that they might obtain happiness.¹

1 The *Medicine Buddha Sutra* with the twelve great aspirations is included in the book: *Aspirations to End Adversity*

I knew a mother and daughter who used to suffer from bad health. After they took it upon themselves to sponsor the construction of one thousand Medicine Buddha statues in the shrine hall of the Canadian Thrangu Monastery, their conditions gradually improved.

I myself had a similar experience. Once, the Sakya Trizin told me that I should build a thousand statues of the Medicine Buddha. I did not have the resources at that time, so I printed a thousand pictures of the Medicine Buddha and I used them to fill the Medicine Buddha statue I was building in the shrine hall of Thrangu Monastery in Boudha, Nepal. Afterwards, I felt that doing so improved my health immensely.

Therefore, if we often pray to the Medicine Buddha from the depths of our hearts, it will definitely bring forth immense benefit and merit.

THE GOAL OF PRACTICE IS TO BENEFIT SENTIENT BEINGS

There are three versions of the Medicine Buddha sadhana: brief, middling, and extensive. Usually, we practice the *A Deep Blue Stream: A Sadhana of Medicine Buddha*, which is shorter and more convenient than the others.

As a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, first we need to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Next, we arouse the mind of bodhicitta in order to benefit all sentient beings. The Medicine Buddha practice is done to benefit all sentient beings, to help them be free from suffering and to obtain happiness.

There is nothing wrong if we practice out of a wish for ourselves to be happy and to be free from suffering and illnesses, but this type of motivation is more limited. We need to practice with a vast motivation that seeks to benefit all sentient beings.

THE MEDICINE BUDDHA IS IN FRONT OF US


Usually, when we practice visualization, we meditate on self and frontal generations. When visualizing the Medicine Buddha, we begin with the practice of front-generation. We visualize in front of us the palace of Medicine Buddha with the principal Medicine Buddha in the center.

He sits in the middle of an eight-petaled lotus flower. Surrounding him starting from the right, on each of the seven petals other than the one directly in front of him, sit seven other Medicine Buddhas. On the petal in front of the principal Medicine Buddha, there is a volume of the *Medicine Buddha Sutra*. Next, we can

visualize sixteen great bodhisattvas (the sixteen great bodhisattvas of the fortunate eon of a thousand buddhas) surrounded by the protectors of the ten directions, but the focus here is to visualize the eight great bodhisattvas (Manjushri, Avalokitesvara, Mahasthamaprapta, Ratnacandana, Aksayamati, Bhaishajya-rajā, Bhaishajya-samudgata, and Maitreya).

INVITATION OF THE WISDOM DEITIES

After the front-generation visualization, we do the self-generation visualization, which is to visualize ourselves as the Medicine Buddha.

After meditating on ourselves as the Medicine Buddha, we invoke the blessings of the wisdom beings (Skt. *jñānasattvas*). Wisdom beings refer to the buddhas and bodhisattvas whom we invite from the pure lands to actually come before us. At the heart centers of the front and self-generated Medicine Buddha pledge beings (Skt. *samayasattvas*) are blue HŪṢ () syllables. Blue light radiates from the HŪṢ syllables to the Medicine Buddha pure realm, inviting the Medicine Buddha wisdom beings to come before us.

The Medicine Buddha wisdom beings arrive, and dissolve into the front and self-generated Medicine Buddha pledge beings, blessing them. Then, light radiates to invite the Buddhas of the five

directions to come and bestow empowerments to the front and self-generated Medicine Buddha pledge beings.

OFFERINGS AND PRAISES

Next, we need to make offerings and praises. To make offerings, we visualize numerous offering goddesses emanating from the heart center of the self-generated Medicine Buddha. They make the seven offerings of water, flowers, incense, light, perfume, food, and music. Then, they offer the eight auspicious symbols (dharma wheel, conch, victory banner, treasure vase, lotus, the two golden carp, endless knot, and parasol), the eight auspicious substances (treasure mirror, Giwang medicine, yogurt, durva grass, bilva fruit, a right-spiraling conch, vermilion powder, and mustard seed), the seven royal treasures (wheel, elephant, horse, general, minister, jewel, and queen), and the mandala of the four continents (Pūrvavideha in the east, Aparagodānīya in the west, Jambudvīpa in the south, and Uttarakuru in the north) and Mount Meru.


After making the offerings, the offering goddesses sing the *Praises to the Medicine Buddha* with their melodic voices.

Having sung the *Praises*, the goddesses melt into light and dissolve into the heart center of the front-generated Medicine Buddha. The Medicine Buddha is pleased.

RECITATION OF THE MEDICINE BUDDHA MANTRA

Following that is the recitation of the Medicine Buddha mantra:

TADYATHĀ OṂ BHAIṢHAJYE BHAIṢHAJYE
MAHĀBHAIṢHAJYE RĀJA SAMUDGATE SVĀHĀ

We visualize a blue syllable HŪṂ () in the heart centers of the self and front-generated Medicine Buddhas. The Medicine Buddha mantra encircles the syllable HŪṂ.

Light radiates from the heart center of the self-generated Medicine Buddha. It melts into the heart center of the front-generated Medicine Buddha. The front-generated Medicine Buddha feels extremely pleased, and his loving-kindness and compassion increase. Then, light radiates from the heart-center of the front-generated Medicine Buddha and dissolves into the self-generated Medicine Buddha and all sentient beings.

As the light dissolves into us, all of the non-virtuous deeds, afflictions, and downfalls of every sentient being are removed. We do the visualization while reciting the Medicine Buddha mantra. At the end, when we have finished the recitation, all the pledge beings and wisdom beings melt into ourselves, and we receive immense blessings.

DEDICATION FOR SENTIENT BEINGS TO BE HAPPY AND FREE FROM SUFFERING

During the Medicine Buddha meditation practice, there is a generation stage and a completion stage. The way to practice the generation stage is to visualize the front and self-generations. The completion stage is when we, at the end, visualize all the pledge beings and wisdom beings of the Medicine Buddha melting into light and dissolving into our own heart center, as we become inseparable from the Medicine Buddha. We need to think that we have realized the wisdom mind of the Medicine Buddha. In this uncontrived condition, we look at the nature of our mind and abide in the moment.

This is a brief and convenient method of doing the Medicine Buddha practice. After we have practiced the Medicine Buddha sadhana, we need to make dedications. We should not think of only

ourselves, but we should dedicate the merit for all sentient beings to be free from suffering and to obtain happiness, eventually attaining ultimate Buddhahood.

The dedication reads, “May the many sentient beings who are sick, quickly be freed from illnesses. And may all the sicknesses of beings, never arise again.” This is making the aspiration that everyone in the world be free from sickness. May no new diseases appear in this world. May all the sick be cured of their illnesses, and may the healthy never become sick.

DAILY VISUALIZATION PRACTICE

If the above visualization is too complicated and we are unable to practice, we can also simply recite the *Praises to Medicine Buddha* and recite the Medicine Buddha mantra. This would be sufficient. Reciting the Medicine Buddha mantra helps to increase the potency of the medicine that a sick person is taking. By reciting the mantra, we are able to benefit ourselves and all sentient beings, and to remove the harm that worldly spirits may cause. Eventually, we will also be able to receive compassionate blessings and our minds will become peaceful.

Generally, whenever we encounter physical discomfort, if we are suffering from pain in a certain part of our body, we can visualize a small Medicine Buddha in that area. Nectar flows from the small Medicine Buddha, removing all our pains and aches. If we experience mental suffering, we can visualize the Medicine Buddha in our hearts pouring out nectar, allowing us to find calm and peace.

MY DAILY PRACTICES

In order to pray for peace in the world and happiness for sentient beings, I recite some aspirations including the Aspiration for the Well-Being of Tibet, The Aspiration of the Mahamudra of Definitive Meaning, and Aspiration for Birth in the Pure Realm of Sukhavati.

In the Kagyu lineage there is the practice of the three roots: the lama, the yidam, and the dharma protector. Therefore, my practice and daily schedule is based on the practice of the three roots.

When I awake in the morning, I pray to the lama by supplicating the lineage of Karmapas through reciting *The Four-Session Guru Yoga*. Oftentimes, we unknowingly commit non-virtues, so I recite the *The Sutra in Three Sections*² (*Confession to the Thirty-five Buddhas*). Next, I do the yidam practice, which is the practice of the White

2. Included in *The Kagyu Monlam Book*

Tara Sadhana,³ instructed by the Sixteenth Karmapa. After the practice, I have my breakfast.

After breakfast, I meet with people who have requested an audience. Some of them come to meet me looking for blessings, others request the refuge vows, and so forth. After the audiences are over, sometimes I teach, give empowerments, or work on my writings, depending on the schedule for the day.



I take a short nap in the afternoon. In the evening, I do the dharma protector practice. After that, I pray for peace in the world and

3 The White Tara Sadhana compiled by the Eighth Tai Situ Rinpoche is available as *The Daily Practice of White Tara*

happiness for sentient beings. I recite some aspirations including the *Aspiration for the Well-Being of Tibet*, *The Aspiration of the Mahamudra of Definitive Meaning*, and *Aspiration for Birth in the Pure Realm of Sukhavati*.⁴ Sometimes, I also recite other prayers for specific purposes, for example to liberate the deceased and for the well-being of the sick.

Recently, I underwent knee surgery in Canada. Afterwards, the doctor told me that his responsibility was to carry out the surgery, which went successfully. However, the rehabilitation to follow the surgery would be in my own hands.

Now that the duty of rehabilitation has fallen upon me, I need to carry out the physical therapist's instructions on a daily basis. The doctor told me that my knees will not heal if I don't rehabilitate properly, so I do various things like taking strolls, massages, and acupuncture treatments daily.

I am a person who really likes to read books, so I spend all my free time reading. Just like the English expression "to have your nose in a book," I bury my nose inside books all day long. I have a strong fondness and appreciation towards books of all types and genres.

4 Those three prayers are included in *The Kagyu Monlam Book*

I remember how challenging the conditions were at Buxa, when we had just arrived in India from Tibet. It was difficult to find the texts we needed to conduct rituals and hold classes. There were around a hundred monks at that time, but we only had one set of texts. We took turns reading. Each person was only able to read one page a day.

It was extremely difficult to find Buddhist texts at that time. Eventually, books printed from carved wood blocks gradually appeared. Nowadays, we have beautifully printed books along with electronic books. These published eBooks are well-crafted and easy to read. Aren't we fortunate just to be able to read them?



THREE:
FINAL PREPARATIONS

SICKNESS IS THE BEST OPPORTUNITY

We can only truly understand the suffering of sickness by having experienced it for ourselves. By having been sick ourselves, we can better cultivate loving-kindness and compassion.

A while ago, I met a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine and I asked him about the history of Chinese medicine. He replied that it started during the Han dynasty. At that time, there was an extremely kindhearted doctor who aspired to save the lives of the people, and he hoped that more people would be able to receive medical treatment. He composed clear and detailed medical prescriptions with ingredients that were inexpensive to obtain, allowing those who could not afford high costs to access treatment. His medical prescriptions have been preserved to the present day.

Sometimes when I think about it, there are doctors these days who lack the right motivation. Even though they may know about certain treatments that may be more beneficial, or they may be able

to give better prescriptions, they are unwilling to share this knowledge. Regardless of whether one frequents dharma centers or not, or whether one is even a Buddhist, it is more important above all to have a kind heart. Some people may not hold a religious belief, but are always willing to help the disadvantaged, support education, provide medical care, and so forth. These are all wonderful things to do.

THE IMPACT OF VISITING THE SICK

Nowadays, many people suffering from serious illnesses like cancer tend to feel quite sad and gloomy. Traditionally, in the past, doctors would comfort patients with words like “It’s alright; you will gradually recover,” and this helped them to feel better. However, doctors nowadays say things like “You only have three months left to live” or “There’s no successful treatment for this. I can’t do anything.” These statements frighten patients and make them feel more fearful and dejected.

Upon hearing such comments, some patients may take a turn for the worse and their condition deteriorates, unable to even make it past the three months the doctor had predicted. There is a saying in Tibetan, “Visiting the sick won’t remove the illness, but it can improve their condition.” When friends and family members visit

the patient, they should utter more words of encouragement like “It’s alright, you will slowly get better.” Although the reassurance itself isn’t able to get rid of the illness, it is extremely helpful for the patient mentally, thus helping their condition to improve.

MAKING AN EFFORT AS A PATIENT

As a patient, we need to understand that once we are born as humans, we have to experience the suffering of birth, aging, sickness, and death. Just as animals experience the suffering of ignorance, this is a reality that we are unable to change. Each of the six to seven billion humans on this planet, including ourselves, has to undergo the suffering of birth, aging, sickness, and death. No one is excluded from this. Instead of wallowing in self-pity, we need to focus our efforts on getting treated, and then there will be a good chance of recovering from our illness.

To improve our condition, we can spend more time practicing the Medicine Buddha sadhana and reciting the names and mantra of the Medicine Buddha. What helps us most in both this life and the next is the practice of the dharma. It is especially easy for us to give rise to the mind of renunciation when we are sick, and this helps our practice to become more effective. It will be excellent if we are able to put this opportunity to good use.

We can also do the practice of *tonglen* (sending and taking) when we are suffering pain. Tonglen is the practice of cultivating the mind of taking on the suffering of sentient beings and sending them our happiness. Not only are we able to benefit all sentient beings through this practice, but we ourselves will also derive great benefits from it.



MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

I don't really see any particular signs when I do my usual recitations. However, when I was sick and bedridden in 2015, I did some recitations. Perhaps because I gave rise to a bit of renunciation, one time I awoke in the middle of the night to see a Medicine

Buddha drawn onto the IV bag. I was quite surprised. I rubbed my eyes and looked at it again. I thought to myself that since I was not at the monastery but at a hospital in a foreign country, how could there be an image of the Medicine Buddha? I believe that I was able to see it because I had given rise to a little renunciation and devotion, along with the blessings of the Medicine Buddha.

My condition also steadily improved after I saw the image of the Medicine Buddha. In addition, the knee surgery I had this year healed more quickly than it had over the past year. These are my personal experiences. I do not feel that I am all that capable, but I do believe I gradually recovered due to the blessings of the Medicine Buddha. Therefore, we need to pray to the Medicine Buddha often; not only is this beneficial for ourselves, but it can also help others.

ADVICE FOR CAREGIVERS

According to *Karma Chagme's Mountain Dharma* composed by Karma Chagme Rinpoche, when we feel pain in places like the head, heart, stomach, and knees, we should visualize a smaller Medicine Buddha in the afflicted area. Nectar flows from the Medicine Buddha and removes our pains. This is a very effective practice.

Apart from the patient themselves, the caregiver also should do this visualization for the patient. Neither the patient nor the care-

giver should talk about sad or meaningless topics. Instead, it might be more beneficial towards improving the situation if we dedicate the time to practice.

Of course, often we are unable to understand the suffering of the patient if we ourselves have not been sick. We can't understand the pain of being tortured by illness. We can only truly understand the suffering of sickness by having experienced it for ourselves. By having been sick ourselves, we can better cultivate loving-kindness and compassion. We should put the opportunity of being sick to good use by giving rise to renunciation and devotion, and do our recitations and practices seriously. There will certainly be great blessings if we can do so.

A VIRTUOUS MIND IS KEY WHEN DYING

The thoughts on our minds when we are dying are extremely important. We mustn't give rise to thoughts like anger, pride, and jealousy. Instead, we need to arouse loving-kindness, compassion, and bodhicitta. This is very beneficial for the bardo and the next life.

When we are sick, we might sometimes feel like it would be better to die instead of being painfully tortured by the illness. When we are older or sick, we will encounter much pain and inconvenience. This is when we should reflect on our precious human birth which is so difficult to obtain. Doing so allows us to live more meaningfully even if we have only a few months or years left to live.

CHERISHING OUR BODIES IN ORDER TO PRACTICE

Only as a human are we able to study the dharma, allowing us to understand our mind and what the afflictions are, and subsequently to tame our afflictions. We should not use this precious human birth recklessly to end our lives.

Many people think that giving up and ending our own lives is very straightforward. But this is when we should consider whether we are able to be reborn in a happier place after death, which is something that is really hard to tell. Thus, we should really cherish our human bodies.

From the Buddhist perspective, our karma follows us after death and it will not be in our favor. Instead, we should properly utilize this precious human birth to really practice the dharma. It will be helpful towards alleviating the suffering of sickness, and will be beneficial to this life and all the lives that follow.

A VIRTUOUS MOTIVATION BENEFITS THE NEXT LIFE

Some people feel depressed, disappointed, or angry when their family members or children do not take care of them or are not

by their side when they are dying. As a result, they give rise to non-virtuous thoughts when they die, which is not a good thing.

No matter whether they have company or not, the dying person should give rise to thoughts of contentment and gratitude, thinking “I have been well-looked after by my children and family in this life already.” This manner of thinking is very important.

The thoughts on our mind when we are dying are extremely important. We should not give rise to thoughts like anger, pride, and jealousy. Instead, we need to give rise to loving-kindness, compassion, and bodhicitta. This is very beneficial for the bardo and the next life. Regardless of whether we are Buddhists or not, we need to keep our minds pure and filled with virtuous thoughts when we are dying.

FOUR CAUSES FOR REBIRTH IN SUKHAVATI

In Karma Chagme Rinpoche’s writings, he explains the four causes of rebirth in Sukhavati according to the *Amitabha Sutra*. We are able to successfully take rebirth in this pure realm when we acquire the four causes.

The first of the four causes is to visualize the pure realm. We should always visualize the realm of Sukhavati, according to the depiction

from either a thangka or a picture. In this way, when we are dying, we will be able to bring the pure realm to mind and take rebirth there.

The second cause is to accumulate merit. Some people like to support dharma centers or monasteries, but if we do not have connections with one, we can also choose to help the poor and schools by providing financial or educational assistance.

The third cause is to generate bodhicitta, which is the wish for all sentient beings to be free from suffering and attain ultimate Buddhahood.

The fourth cause is to make aspirations. We pray for all sentient beings, including ourselves, to be able to take rebirth in Sukhavati and not to fall into the lower realms.

PREPARATION INSTEAD OF DENIAL

Many older people regard the topic of death as taboo. This kind of thinking is actually mistaken and serves no purpose. There is an analogy: a monkey who is playing around suddenly sees an eagle swooping down to catch him. He becomes afraid and covers his eyes with his hands. This is not a helpful move, because the eagle will still be able to catch the monkey.

We avoid and shun the topic of death in the same way. It is pointless, just like the monkey covering his eyes. It would be much better for us to start preparing for death as soon as possible.

If we are Buddhists, we should make use of our time to listen to more teachings and practice the dharma. We need to cherish every opportunity, even if it is reciting a single Mani mantra, reflecting on an oral instruction, or generating a little loving-kindness and compassion.

In general, we must remember that every person without exception will encounter sickness and death. Only by choosing the right approach to face these types of suffering can we bring about benefits.

COMPANIONSHIP IS THE BEST FORM OF CARE

As children, we should focus our efforts on taking care of our parents. It is best if we can generate a sense of gratitude towards being able to be by their side and look after them. Caregivers should also cultivate the same attitude and regard the sick as their own family members.

Nowadays, children tend to not really care about or look after their aging parents. Nor do they keep in frequent contact. Children only rush to see their parents once they fall sick or something terrible happens. Even worse, some care solely about their inheritance. It is really important for children to be loving and affectionate towards their parents, and to be there for them at all times.

TO TAKE CARE OF OTHERS IS TO MAKE THEM HAPPY

Older people tend to be more fixed in their thinking. Their tempers might deteriorate and they may develop a fondness for nagging. These attributes can result in their children or caregivers becoming impatient, but this is exactly when we should choose to practice patience and to generate loving-kindness and compassion. In this way, the older person will feel happy and we will gain the opportunity to accumulate merit.

People who are sick tend to be emotionally unstable and prone to anger. We should not talk back or lose our temper. We need to be patient. We should try our best to satisfy their wants and needs and to make them happy. We can pray, do recitations, and dedicate our merit to them. These are the best things we can do for the sick.

A REMINDER FOR THE FINAL MOMENTS

When we are looking after the sick, whether as children or as caregivers, we should contemplate that every person goes through the processes of birth, aging, sickness, and death. It is a fact of nature, so we should not feel excessively sad about it. If the caregiver himself is overwhelmed with sadness, then the person being looked after also feels miserable as a result. It would be terrible if the care-

giver were to become heartbroken and inconsolable once the sick person had passed away.

Therefore, as children, we should focus our efforts on taking care of our parents. It is best if we can generate a sense of gratitude towards being able to be by their side and look after them. Caregivers should also cultivate the same attitude and regard the sick as their own family members.

Finally, if we realize that the sick person might be close to death, we need to remain calm at their side. We can reassure them with reminders like, “You are about to die. You must keep a virtuous mind and pray earnestly to your guru or the Buddha.”

If the person does regular dharma practice, we can remind them not to forget the practices or the dharma teachings that they have learned. We can also remind them to practice tonglen even if they have not had much experience with the practice.

In the mind training teachings, the practice of tonglen is one of the most important practices for the dying. Tonglen is practiced by using the breath as a support for meditation: As we breathe out, we meditate on sending our happiness to sentient beings. As we breathe in, we meditate that the suffering of all sentient beings dissolves into our bodies.

If the dying person is a Buddhist, according to the Buddhist tradition he should receive the empowerments of Amitabha and Akshobhya. Doing so is not only helpful at the time of death, but is also beneficial for the future rebirth.

The practice of *phowa* is conducted after the person dies. A series of rituals spanning forty-nine days are conducted to liberate the deceased by helping them to remove non-virtuous karma and obstacles, allowing them to be reborn in a better place.

THERE IS ALWAYS A WAY IN LIFE

We often encounter difficulties and unfavorable situations in life. But we should not give in to despair. When our loved ones leave us, we must not lose hope and become pessimistic; we need to try our best to live on. We might encounter the dharma along the way, and our lives will be transformed as a result.

Once, there was a businessman in Tibet called Norbu Sangpo. He had failed at business nine times. After the ninth time, he was overwhelmed with grief and wondered why he kept failing at business. While he was lying in a broad grassland, engulfed in sadness, Norbu Sangpo noticed a little bug crawling beside him. The bug tried desperately to climb to the top of a blade of grass, but fell off the stalk every single time. It tried to climb it a total of nine times.

Then, on its tenth attempt, it actually made it all the way to the top! There was a seed at the tip of the grass and the bug was able to eat it.

Norbu Sangpo immediately had a realization — if bugs can succeed at something, humans must be even more capable! Inspired by the bug, he made another attempt at his business. This time around, he succeeded.

In the same way, the past is gone and we must continue living our lives. We must not be overcome by the grief of the passing of a loved one or consider ending our own lives. Suicide is an extremely terrible thing that brings no benefit but only harm to both ourselves and others. As long as we are alive, there is a chance to lead a wonderful life. Instead of being short-sighted, we should set our eyes on the future.

FULFILLING THE WISHES OF THE DEPARTED

Whether the caregiver is the child or a family member of the deceased, they will likely encounter a very challenging time. But the dead are gone, and the best that we can do is to fulfill the final wishes of the deceased — we need to cherish life, maintain a kind heart, and live on happily. This is the best thing that we can do for the deceased, and this also allows them to depart in peace.

Finally, we need to be especially attentive with regards to any inheritance that may be left behind. Whether the deceased was a parent or someone else, their possessions were obtained through a lifetime's worth of hard work. We should not be thinking only about how to divide the inheritance. Instead, we should be thinking about how we can use any money to build monasteries, stupas, or statues to benefit the deceased. Of course, we don't have to use the inheritance for dharma activities; we can also use it for charitable deeds like supporting schools, helping the poor, or practicing life release.

It will definitely be beneficial to the deceased if we can dedicate at least a portion of the inheritance towards charity. The possessions accumulated during their life can then become valuable and meaningful as a result.

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