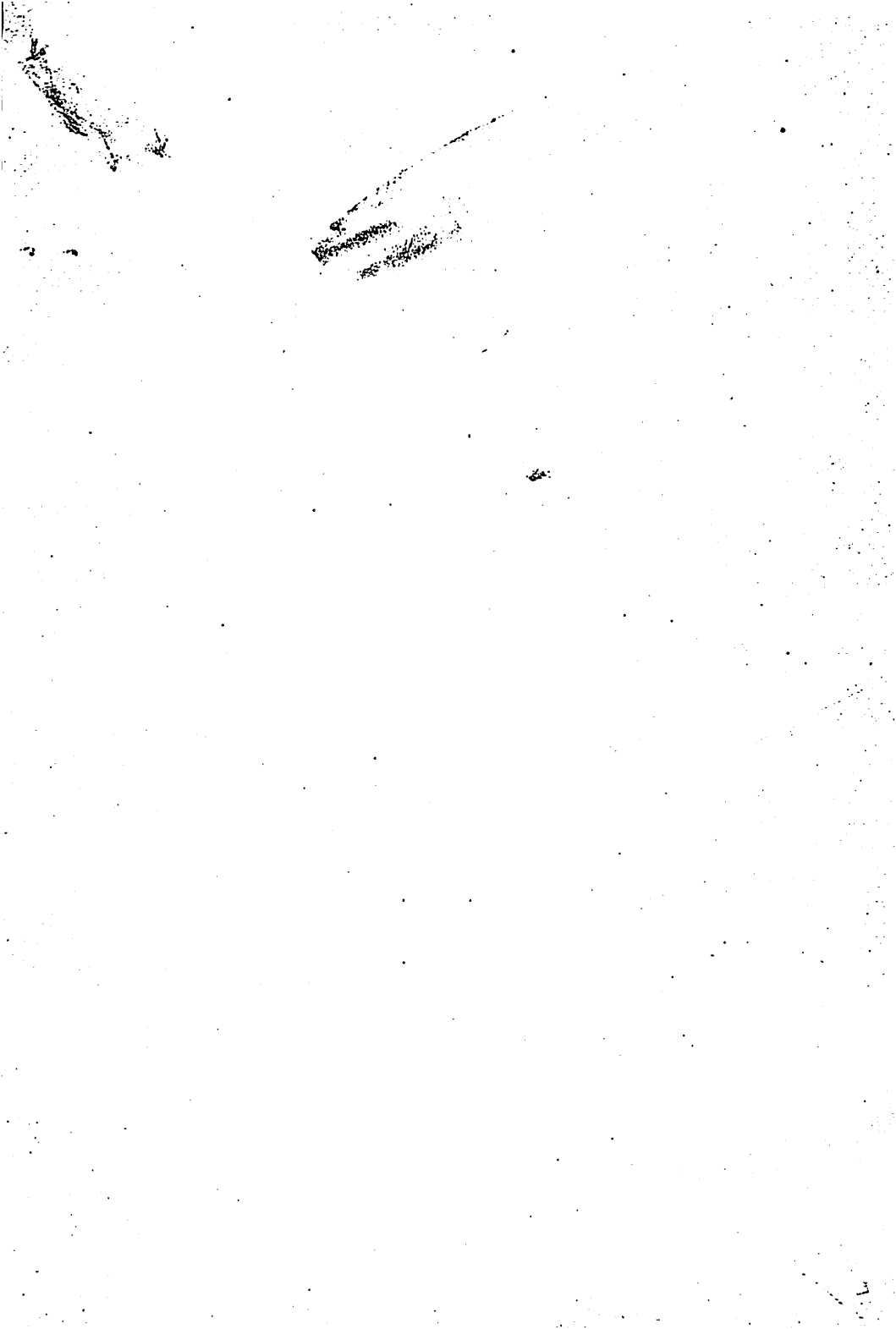




A PATH

TO HAPPINESS

Thubten Chodron



A Path to Happiness

Venerable
Thubten Chodron

Edited By
Caroline Chen

Texas Buddhist Association

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Preface

Ven. Thubten Chodron is a familiar face at the Jade Buddha Temple in Houston, Texas. Not only does she make time to come to the annual Buddhist Youth Summer Camp, but she speaks on many other occasions. Her talks have been recorded and kept in the library. In May of 1997, Mr. Li-Ping Chuang, a committee leader at the Temple, proposed to transcribe her speeches from those tapes, then publish and distribute them to the public.

I helped Mr. Chuang gather some volunteers, and in six months we managed to complete this project. We are extremely grateful to everyone who made this possible. Thanks to Tina Hsu for finding so many wonderful people from the University of Texas at Austin Buddhist Association to help make this project so successful. Sincerest gratitude goes out to Jessica Cai, Vicki Ching-Jung Lee Chang, Tsu-Wang Chen, Raul Nunez, and Harlan Smalling for spending the time and effort transcribing the tapes. What our team lacked in experience, we more than made up for in heart and effort. As a first attempt, I think our team did a wonderful job.

Last but not least, we thank Ven. Chodron. At present, most Buddhist literature is written in Chinese, and she has been instrumental in exposing a wider audience to Buddhism.

Books written in English allow Buddhism to be accessible to both Americans and second generation Asian-Americans, who in increasing numbers are not literate in Chinese. Also, Ven. Chodron speaks on a level that is practical and easy to understand. She relates her Dharma talks with real-life experiences, using examples from her own life. She is able to transcend religious barriers, for what she speaks of cannot be limited to any one religion. It is helpful to any and all seeking to develop a heart of loving kindness that is so important as we proceed into the 21st century.

Amitabha!

Caroline Chen
Editor

Chapter 1
Practicing Buddhism
in Daily Life

Practicing Buddhism in Daily Life

Many people have the misconception that spiritual life or religious life is somewhere up there in the sky — an ethereal or mystical reality — and that our everyday life is too mundane and not so nice. Often people think that to be a spiritual person, we must ignore or neglect our everyday life, and go into another, special realm. Actually, I think being a spiritual person means becoming a real human being. Thich Nhat Hanh, a well-known Vietnamese monk, said, "It is not so important whether you walk on water or walk in space. The true miracle is to walk on earth." It's true. In other words, becoming a kind human being is probably the greatest miracle we can perform.

One time I gave a talk in a Hong Kong school to a group of children. One child asked, "Can you bend spoons with your mind?" Another asked, "Has God ever talked to you?" They were very disappointed when I said, "No." I went on to explain that for me, a real miracle is becoming a kind human being. If you have psychic powers but lack a kind heart, the powers are of no use. In fact, they could even be disadvantageous: people may get very upset if they find all their spoons have been bent!

How do we cultivate a kind heart? It is not enough to

tell ourselves that we should be nice, because telling ourselves what we should or should not be, feel, or do doesn't make us become that way. Filling ourselves with "shoulds" often just makes us feel guilty because we never are what we think we should be. We need to know how to actually transform our mind. In other words, we must realize the disadvantages of being self-centered. We must truly want to develop a kind heart, not just keep thinking that we should develop a kind heart. In the morning, when we first wake up, before getting out of bed, before thinking about what we will eat for breakfast or which obnoxious jerk we will see at the office, we can start the day by thinking, "Today as much as possible, I won't harm anybody. Today, as much as possible, I am going to try to be of service and benefit to others. Today I want to do all actions so that all living beings can attain the long-term happiness of enlightenment."

Setting a positive motivation the first thing in the morning is very beneficial. When we first wake up, our mind is very subtle and delicate. If we set a strong positive motivation at this time, there is a greater chance of it staying with us and influencing us throughout the day. After generating our positive motivation, we get out of bed, wash, maybe have a cup of tea, and then meditate or recite prayers. By starting the day in this way, we get in touch with ourselves and become our own friend by treasuring and reinforcing our good qualities.

Sometimes it is difficult to find time to meditate each day. But we always have time to watch TV. We always have time to go shopping. We always have time to get a snack from the refrigerator. Why is there never time to meditate? When we understand the value and effect of spiritual practice, then it will become a high priority in our life, and when something is very important, we find time for it. In this way, try to set up a daily meditation practice of maybe 15 or 30 minutes in the morning. To do that, we might have to experience the "incredible sacrifice" of giving up 15 or 30 minutes of television the previous evening so we can go to bed a little earlier. In the same way that we always find time to eat because food nourishes our body, we will find time to meditate and recite some prayers because it nourishes us spiritually. When we respect ourselves spiritually, we respect ourselves as human beings. Nourishing ourselves in that way then becomes a very important priority.

In the morning, it is good to begin your meditation session with a few prayers and cultivate the altruistic intention to benefit others by doing the meditation. Then do the breathing meditation for a while. Sit calmly; experience your breath going in and out; and be aware of the breath nourishing you. Just be in the present moment with the breath, and let all the discursive thoughts and worries subside. You may want to chant Kuan Yin's (Avalokiteshvara's) mantra or that of the

Buddha. It is helpful to remember the Buddha's qualities at this time, for it inspires us to emulate the Buddha's kindness, wisdom, and skill in our daily activities. Or you may do an analytic meditation, thinking about the meaning of a particular teaching the Buddha gave and applying it to your own life. This also steers your energy in a very positive direction first thing in the morning.

Some people say, "I have children. How can I meditate or say prayers in the morning when they need my attention?" One way is to get up earlier than your children. Another idea is to invite your children to meditate or chant with you. One time I was staying with my brother's family. My niece, who was about six or seven at that time, used to come into my room because we were the first two to wake up in the morning. As I was reciting prayers or meditating, I explained to her that this is a time when I am quiet and do not want to be disturbed. She would come in and sometimes she would draw. Other times, she would sit in my lap. Several times she asked me to sing to her, and I would chant prayers and mantras out loud. She really liked this and did not disturb me at all.

It is very good for children to see their parents sit still and be calm. That gives them the idea that maybe they too can do the same. If Mom and Dad are always busy, running around, talking on the phone, stressed out, or collapsed in front of the TV, the kids will also be like this. Is this what

you want for your children? If you want your children to learn certain attitudes or behaviors, you have to cultivate them yourselves. Otherwise, how will your children learn? If you care about your children, you have to care about yourselves as well and be mindful of living a healthy and balanced life for their benefit as well as for your own.

You can also teach your children how to make offerings to the Buddha and how to recite simple prayers and mantras. Once, I stayed with a friend and her three-year-old daughter. Every morning when we got up, we would all bow three times to the Buddha. Then, the little girl would give the Buddha a present—a cookie or some fruit—and the Buddha would give her a present also, a sweet or a cracker. It was very nice for the child because at age three, she was establishing a good relationship with the Buddha and, at the same time, was learning to be generous and share things. When my friend cleaned the house, did chores, or went places with her daughter, they would chant mantras together. The little girl loved the melodies of the mantras. This helped her because whenever she got upset or frightened, she knew she could chant mantras to calm herself down.

Let's return to your daily practice. After your morning meditation, have breakfast and set off for work. How are you going to practice Dharma at work? First, try to remember the kind heart and the motivation you cultivated in the morning.

Throughout the day, continually remind yourself that you don't want to harm anybody, that you want to be of service to them, and that you seek to do all actions for the ultimate enlightenment of yourself and others. To remind yourself of this, you can use a frequent event as a trigger to call you back to your motivation. For example, every time you stop at a red light, instead of being irritated and thinking, "Why is this red light so long? I'm late for work!" think, "Today, I want to have a kind heart towards others." Thus the red light becomes an opportunity to remember the kind heart. When the telephone rings, instead of rushing to pick it up, first think, "May I be of service to whomever is on the line." Then answer the phone. Every time your pager goes off, calmly come back to the kind heart, then respond to the call. A friend told me that her trigger to come back to the kind heart was her children calling, "Mommy! Mommy!" Since this happened frequently throughout the day, she became familiar with the kind heart and also was much more patient with her children.

Throughout the day, try to be aware of what you are thinking, feeling, saying, and doing, instead of living on "automatic." When we live on automatic, we go through life reacting to things but never really experiencing what life is about. This is why we feel out of touch with ourselves, like strangers to ourselves. For example, you get in the car and

drive to work. When you get to work, if somebody asks you, "What did you think about during the half hour you were driving?" you probably wouldn't know. We are unaware of what is going on inside us. Yet a lot is going on and this influences how we feel about ourselves and how we relate to other people.

The antidote to living on automatic is to cultivate mindfulness. Mindfulness means being aware of what we are thinking, feeling, saying, and doing each moment. It also means being mindful of our ethical values and of the kind heart so that we can live according to them in our daily lives. By cultivating this awareness, we will no longer be spaced out, just reacting to things, and then wondering why we are so confused and exhausted at the end of the day. If we are mindful, we will notice that we have a kind heart and will enrich it and let our actions flow from it. Or, we might become aware that we are upset, irritated, angry, or are on the verge of scolding somebody. If we realize that, we can come back to our breath, come back to our kind heart, instead of throwing our negative energy out in the world.

We also become more mindful of how we interact with our environment. We realize that we live in an interdependent world, and if we pollute our environment, we are affecting ourselves, our children, and other living beings. Because we are mindful of being kind, we will curtail the ways in which

we pollute the environment. We will carpool when going to work or school, instead of using up gasoline in a car by ourselves. We will recycle the things we use: paper, cans, plastic containers, bottles, glass jars, and newspapers. We know that if we throw these away in the garbage, we are destroying our planet and are affecting other beings in a negative way. Thus we will re-use our plastic bags and paper bags when we go to the supermarket. In addition, we will not leave our air conditioners or heaters on when we are not home and will not use products, such as styrofoam, whose production releases many pollutants into the air.

I think that if the Buddha were alive today, he would establish vows that say we have to recycle and stop wasting resources. Many of our monastic vows arose because lay people complained to the Buddha about what monks or nuns did. Each time this happened, the Buddha would establish a precept in order to curb the detrimental behavior. If the Buddha were alive today, people would complain to him, "So many Buddhists throw out their tin cans, glass jars, and newspapers! They use disposable cups, chopsticks, and plates, which not only make more garbage but also cause the destruction of many trees. They do not seem to care about the environment and the living beings in it!" I would feel pretty embarrassed if I were doing that and someone complained to the Buddha about my behavior, wouldn't you? That's why I think the

Buddha would definitely set down vows saying that we have to recycle and to curtail consumption.

Mindfulness also enables us to be aware if we are about to act destructively as we go through the day. Mindfulness says, "Uh oh! I'm getting angry," or "I'm being greedy," or "I'm feeling jealous." Then we can apply the various antidotes the Buddha taught to help us calm our minds. For example, if we discover we are annoyed and anger is arising, we can stop and look at the situation from the other person's point of view. When we do this, we recognize they want to be happy, and because they aren't happy, they are doing that action we find objectionable. Then instead of harming them out of anger, we will be more compassionate and understanding and will work with them to negotiate an agreement.

But how do we do this when a quarrel is just about to start or we're already in the middle of one? We have to practice beforehand, in our meditation practice. In the heat of the situation, it is difficult to remember what the Buddha taught if we haven't practiced it already when we were calm and peaceful. In the same way that a football team practices on a regular basis, we need to meditate on patience and to recite prayers daily to get well-trained. Then when we encounter a situation in daily life, we will be able to use the teachings.

Another practice to increase our mindfulness and help us remember our motivation is offering our food before we

eat. We imagine the food to be blissful wisdom nectar—something very delicious that increases our bliss and wisdom, not our attachment, when we eat. Then we imagine a small Buddha made of light at our heart. When we eat, we offer this nectar to the Buddha at our heart. The Buddha radiates light that fills us up. To do this, you don't need to sit in perfect meditation position in the middle of a restaurant! You can visualize and contemplate in this way while waiting for the food. While your companions or business associates continue to chat, you can do this visualization and offer your food to the Buddha without anyone knowing. Sometimes, for example, when you're at home with your family, you can pause and focus on offering your food. It's very nice for a family to recite together a prayer offering their food. I stayed with one family, and their six-year-old son led us in reciting the prayer. It was very touching.

When you eat, eat mindfully. Be aware of the effort other people put into growing, transporting, and preparing the food. Realize your interdependence with other living beings and how much benefit you have received from them, such as the food we eat. If we reflect in this way before we eat, we will feel very happy and grateful when we eat, and we will eat more mindfully too. And if we eat mindfully, we won't overeat, and then we won't have to spend so much money on special diets to lose weight!

It is important to eat in a dignified manner. Sometimes we see people in a cafeteria line who haven't even paid for the food yet and are already shoveling it in. This is eating on automatic. It resembles a dog who runs to the bowl and slurps up the food. When we do this reflection and offer our food to the Buddha at our heart, we eat slower and are more relaxed. This is how human beings eat.

In this way, we maintain mindfulness and enrich our kind heart as we go through the day. When we come home in the evening, instead of collapsing in front of the TV or dropping on the bed and falling asleep, we can take a few minutes to sit quietly by ourselves. We reflect about and come to terms with what happened during the day. We look back over our day and think, "What went well today? Did I act with a kind heart?" We notice the instances when we acted kindly and rejoice. We dedicate that merit, that positive potential, for the enlightenment of ourselves and others.

In reviewing the day, we may discover that we were angry, jealous, or greedy. We didn't realize it at the time when it was happening. But looking back over the day, we don't feel so good about what happened. It may have been our attitude, or what we said to somebody, or how we acted. To remedy this, we develop regret and do some purification practice so we can forgive ourselves and let that negative energy go. In this way, we "clean up" emotionally and resolve

any uncomfortable feelings or misdirected actions that may have arisen during the day. Having done this, our sleep will be peaceful. When you lie down, imagine the Buddha sitting on your pillow, and put your head in the Buddha's lap when you go to sleep. This is very comforting and helps you to remember the Buddha's good qualities and to have better dreams.

Practicing Dharma is not difficult or time consuming. We always have time; there are always 24 hours in a day. If we direct our mind in a positive direction, we can transform whatever action we do into the path to enlightenment. In this way, the Dharma becomes part of our life in an organic way. Getting up in the morning is Dharma; eating and going to work is Dharma; sleeping is Dharma. By transforming our attitude in the midst of daily activities, our life becomes very meaningful.

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Chapter 2
Dealing with
Anxiety

Dealing with Anxiety

Before talking about how to deal with anxiety, let's do a brief meditation that will help us release some of our stress and anxiety. When meditating, sit comfortably. You can cross your legs or sit with your feet flat on the floor. Place the right hand on the left, the thumbs touching so they make a triangle in your lap against your body. Sit up straight, with your head level; then lower your eyes.

Before we begin the actual meditation, we generate our motivation by thinking, "I will meditate in order to improve myself, and by doing so, may I be able to benefit all the beings I come in contact with. In the long term, may I eliminate all defilements and enhance all my good qualities so that I can become a fully enlightened Buddha in order to benefit all beings most effectively." Even though enlightenment may seem a long way off, by generating the intention to transform our mind into one of an enlightened being, we gradually approach that goal.

One meditation found in all the Buddhist traditions is the meditation on the breath. It helps to calm the mind, develop concentration, and brings our attention to the present moment. To focus on our breath and really experience what it feels like to breathe, we have to let go of the thoughts that

chatter about the past and future and bring our attention simply to what is happening now. This is always more relaxing than the hopes and fears of the past and the future, which exist merely in our mind and are not happening in the present moment.

Breathe normally and naturally; do not force your breath, and do not deep-breathe. Let your attention rest at your abdomen. As you breathe in, be aware of the sensations in your body as the air enters and leaves. Notice that your abdomen rises as you inhale and falls as you exhale. If other thoughts or sounds enter your mind or distract you, just be aware that your attention has strayed, and gently, but firmly, bring your attention back to the breath. Your breath is like home; whenever the mind wanders, bring your attention home to the breath. Just experience the breath; be aware of what is happening right now as you inhale and exhale. (Meditate for however long you wish.)

When Buddha described the evolution of samsara—the cycle of constantly recurring problems in which we are presently trapped, he said that its origin was ignorance. This is a specific type of ignorance, one that misunderstands the nature of existence. Whereas things are dependent on other factors and are constantly in flux, ignorance apprehends them in a very concrete fashion. It makes everything seem super-concrete, as if all persons and objects had their own solid essence. We especially make ourselves very concrete, thinking, "Me. My

problems. My life. My family. My job. Me, me, me."

First we make ourselves very solid; then we cherish ourselves above all else. By observing how we live our lives, we see that we have incredible attachment. We want to take care of ourselves. We want to be happy. We like this; we don't like that. We want this and we don't want that. Everybody else comes second. I come first. Of course, we're too polite to say this, but when we observe how we live our lives, it is evident.

It is easy to see how anxiety develops because of so much focus on "me." There are over five billion human beings on this planet and zillions of other living beings throughout the universe, but we make a big deal out of just one of them — me. With such self-preoccupation, of course anxiety follows. Due to this self-centered attitude, we pay an incredible amount of attention to everything that has to do with us. In this way, even very small things that have to do with us become extraordinarily important, and we worry and get stressed about them. For example, if the neighbor's child does not do his homework one night, we don't get anxious about it. But if our child doesn't do his homework one night, it's a big deal! If somebody else's car gets dented, we say, "Well, that's too bad," and forget about it. But if our car gets dented, we talk about it and complain about it for a long time. If a colleague is criticized, it doesn't bother us. But if we receive

even a tiny bit of negative feedback, we become angry, hurt, or depressed.

Why is this? We can see that anxiety is very intricately related to self-centeredness. The bigger the idea that "I am the most important one in the universe and everything that happens to me is so crucial" is, the more anxious we are going to be. My own anxious mind is a very interesting phenomenon. Last year, I did a retreat by myself for four weeks, so I had a nice long time to spend with my own anxious mind and know it very well. My guess is that it's similar to yours. My anxious mind picks out something that happened in my life, and it does not make a difference what it is. Then I spin it around in my mind, thinking, "Oh, what if this happens? What if that happens? Why did this person do this to me? How come this happened to me?" and on and on. My mind could spend hours philosophizing, psychologizing, and worrying about this one thing. It seemed like nothing else in the world was important but my particular melodrama.

When we are in the middle of worry and anxiety regarding something, that thing appears to us to be incredibly important. It's as if our mind doesn't have a choice: it has to think about this thing because it's of monumental significance. But I noticed in my retreat that my mind would get anxious about something different every meditation session. Maybe it was just looking for variety! It's too boring just to have one thing

to be anxious about! While I was worrying about one thing, it seemed like it was the most important one in the whole world, and the other ones weren't as important. Until the next session arrived and another anxiety became the most important one, everything else was not so bad. I began to realize it wasn't the thing I was worrying about that was the difficulty. It was my own mind that was looking for something to worry about. It doesn't really matter what the problem is. If I'm habitually anxious, I'll find a problem to worry about. If I can't find one, then I'll invent one or cause one.

In other words, the real issue is not what is happening outside but what is happening inside of us. How we experience a situation depends on how we view it—how we interpret what is happening, how we describe the situation to ourselves. Thus the Buddha said that all of our experiences of happiness and suffering don't come from other people or other things, but from our own minds.

How do we deal with our minds when we become very self-centered and anxious? It is important to learn to laugh at ourselves. We really do have a monkey mind when it comes to anxiety, don't we? We worry about this and then we worry about that, like a monkey jumping all over the place. We have to be able to laugh at the monkey instead of taking it so seriously and to develop a sense of humor about our problems. Sometimes our problems are pretty funny, aren't

they? If we could step back and look at our problems, many of them would seem quite humorous. If a character in a soap opera had this problem or was acting this way, we would laugh at it. Sometimes I do that: I step back and look at myself, thinking, "Oh, look how Chodron feels so sorry for herself. Sniff, sniff. There are so many sentient beings having so many different experiences in the universe, and poor Chodron just stubbed her toe."

Thus one antidote is to have a sense of humor and be able to laugh at ourselves. But for those of you who can't laugh at yourselves, there is another way. The great Indian sage Shantideva advised us, "If you have a problem and you can do something about it, there is no need to get anxious about it because you can actively do something to solve it. On the other hand, if there is nothing you can do to solve it, getting anxious about it is useless — it won't fix the problem." So either way you look at it, whether the problem is solvable or unsolvable, there is no sense in getting anxious or upset about it. Try thinking like that about one of your problems. Just sit for a minute and think, "Is there something I can do about this or not?" If something can be done, go ahead and do that so there's no need to sit around and worry. If nothing can be done to alter the situation, it is useless to worry. Just let it go. Try thinking like that about a problem that you have and see if it helps.

Sometimes we are anxious and nervous before going into a new situation. Afraid that we will make fools out of ourselves, we think, "I may do something wrong; I'll look like a jerk, and everybody will laugh at me or think badly of me." In these cases, I find it helpful to say to myself: "Well, if I can avoid looking like an idiot, I'll do that. But if something happens and I look like an idiot, then okay, so be it." We can never predict what other people will think or what they will say behind our backs. Maybe it will be good, maybe not. At some point, we have to let go and say to ourselves, "Well, that's okay." Now I've also started thinking, "If I do something stupid and people think poorly of me, that's okay. I do have faults and make mistakes, so it's no wonder if others notice them. But if I can acknowledge my mistakes and rectify them as much as possible, then I have fulfilled my responsibility, and surely others don't hold my mistake against me."

Another way of dealing with anxiety is to lessen our self-centeredness and train our mind to pay more attention to others than to ourselves. This doesn't mean that we ignore ourselves. We need to pay attention to ourselves, but in a healthy way, not in a neurotic, anxious way. Of course, we need to take care of our body and should try to keep our mind happy. We can do this in a healthy and relaxed way by being mindful of what we are thinking, saying, and doing.

This kind of focus on ourselves is necessary and is part of Buddhist practice. However, it is very different from the self-centeredness that makes us so distressed and restless. That self-centeredness puts undue emphasis on ourselves and thus makes every small thing into a big one.

By considering the disadvantages of self-preoccupation, we will find it easier to let go of that attitude. When it arises in our minds, we will notice it and think, "If I follow this self-centered attitude, it will cause me problems. Therefore, I won't follow that way of thinking and will turn my attention instead to view the situation from a broader perspective, one that encompasses the wishes and needs of everyone involved." Then we can use the same amount of energy to be sensitive to others and develop a kind heart towards them. When we look at others with an open mind, we recognize that everybody wants to be happy and free of suffering as intensely as we do. When opening our hearts to this fact, there will be no space left inside ourselves for self-centered anxiety. Look in your own life; when your heart has been filled with genuine kindness toward others, have you simultaneously been depressed and anxious? It's impossible.

Some people may think, "But I do care about others, and that's what makes me anxious," or "I worry about my kids all the time because I care about them." This kind of caring isn't the open-hearted loving-

kindness that we are trying to develop in Buddhist practice. This kind of caring is limited to only a few people. Who are the people that we care about so much? All the ones who are related to "me"—my kids, my parents, my friends, my family. We are right back to "me, me, me" again, aren't we? This kind of caring about others isn't what we are trying to develop here. Instead, we want to learn to care for others impartially, without thinking some beings are more important and others are less worthy. The more we can develop equanimity and an open, caring heart towards all, the more we'll feel close to everyone else and the more we will be able to reach out to them. We have to train our mind in this broad attitude, expanding our care from the small group of people around us so that it gradually is extended to everyone—those we know and those we don't, and especially to those we don't like.

To do this, start by thinking, "Everyone wants to be happy, just like me, and nobody wants to suffer, just like me." If we focus on that thought alone, there is no space left for anxiety in our minds anymore. When we look at each living being with this recognition and immerse our minds in that thought, our minds will automatically become very open and caring. Try doing this today. Whenever you are looking at people—for example, when you are in a shop, on the street, in a bus—think, "This is a living being that has feelings, someone who wants to be happy and doesn't want to suffer.

This person is just like me." You will find that you will no longer feel that they are complete strangers. You will feel like you know them in some way and will respect each of them.

Then, if we think about the kindness of others, our mood and the way we see others totally transform. Usually we do not think about others' kindness to us but our kindness to them. Instead, we focus on the thought, "I care for them and helped them so much, and they don't appreciate it." This makes us very anxious and we start to worry, "Oh, I did something nice for that person, but they don't like me," or "I helped that person, but they don't recognize how much I helped them," or "Nobody appreciates me. How come nobody loves me?" In this way, our monkey minds have taken over the show. We focus so single-pointedly on how kind we have been to others and how little they appreciate us that even when somebody says to us, "Can I help you?" we think, "What do you want from me?" Our self-preoccupation has made us suspicious and unable to see or accept the kindness and love that others genuinely give us.

By meditating on the kindness of others, we will see that we have actually been the recipients of an incredible amount of kindness and love from others. In doing this meditation, first think about the kindness of your friends and relatives, all the different things that they have done for you or given you. Start with the people who took care of you

when you were an infant. When you see parents taking care of their kids, think, "Somebody took care of me that way," and "Somebody gave me loving attention and took care of me like that." If nobody had given us that kind of attention and care, we wouldn't be alive today. No matter what kind of family we came from, someone did take care of us. The fact that we are alive attests to that because as children, we could not take care of ourselves.

Think about the incredible kindness we have received from those who taught us to speak. I visited a friend and her two-year-old child who was learning to speak. I sat there, watching as my friend repeated things over and over again just so her child could learn to speak. To think that other people did that for us! We take our ability to speak for granted, but when we think about it, we see that other people have spent a lot of time teaching us how to speak, make sentences, and pronounce words. That is a tremendous amount of kindness we have received from others, isn't it? Where would we be if no one taught us how to talk? We did not learn by ourselves. Other people taught us. Everything we have learned throughout childhood and everything we keep learning as adults — every new thing that comes into our lives and enriches us — we receive due to the kindness of others. All of our knowledge and each of our talents exist because others have taught us and have helped us to develop them.

Then, consider the tremendous kindness we have received from strangers, people that we do not know. So many beings whom we don't know personally have done things that have helped us. For example, we have received an education due to the kindness of people who have dedicated their lives to building schools and establishing educational programs. We ride on roads that exist due to the effort of so many engineers and construction workers whom we have never met. We probably do not know the people who built our homes, the architects, engineers, construction crew, plumbers, electricians, painters, and so forth. They may have built our homes in the summer, enduring the hot weather. We don't know these people, but because of their kindness and effort, we have homes to live in and a temple where we can come and meet together. We don't even know who these people are to say, "Thank you." We just come in, use the buildings, and receive benefit from their efforts. Seldom do we consider what they had to go through so that we could live so comfortably.

Next, reflect on the benefit from those who have harmed us. Although it may seem that they harmed us, if we look at it in another way, we have received benefit from them. For example, a few years ago, someone did something quite mean to me behind my back. At the time, I was very upset and thought, "Oh, this is awful. How could this person do this to me?" Now I realize that I'm glad this situation

happened because it opened up a new direction in my life. If this person had not been so unkind to me, I would still be doing what I had done before and would probably be stuck in a rut. But this person's actions pushed me to be more creative. Although the situation was very painful initially, in the long-term, it had a very good effect on my life. It forced me to grow and to develop other talents. So even the people or situations that we feel are bad can turn out to be good in the long run.

It is interesting to look at some of our present problems from that perspective. Instead of getting anxious about our present problems, think, "Maybe in a few years, when my perspective is broader, I will be able to look back on the people causing this problem and see that it was really a beneficial situation. I will be able to see it as something that propelled me in a new direction." Try to think about your present problems in this way. If we do that, the present anxiety stops, and slowly, our heart will be filled with appreciation for the kindness of others.

Meditating on the kindness of others is quite important, so sit and do it slowly. Think of all the individuals from whom you have received benefit, even those you do not know, like the people who built your cars, make the books you read, and collect your garbage. Do you know the garbage collectors in your neighborhood? I don't know the ones in my neighborhood.

I don't see them. But they are incredibly kind. If they did not take away my garbage every week, I would have a big problem! So many people serve us in countless ways. If we can open our heart and see how much we have received from them, our attitude will completely change. We will become very grateful, content, and joyful.

When we are in the middle of a problem, we feel like nobody is helping us. We feel all alone with our problem. But when we do this meditation, we can see that, in fact, a lot of people are helping us. Even more people could help us if we would open ourselves up to receive from them. If we think like this, our anxiety will go away. We will not feel stuck and alone in our problem because we will see that there is actually quite a bit of help and assistance out there.

After we meditate on the kindness of others, it is easy to feel love and compassion towards them. Love is the wish for sentient beings to have happiness and its causes. Compassion is the wish for them to be free from suffering and its causes. When great love and great compassion are alive in our hearts, we will want to take responsibility to benefit all others and will have a great resolve to do so. From this comes bodhicitta, the altruistic intention to become a Buddha in order to benefit others most effectively. When we have this altruistic intention to become a Buddha, we become a bodhisattva. When we are a bodhisattva, it is guaranteed that we will have no anxiety.

Look at Kuan Yin. She looks at all sentient beings and wants them to be happy. She does whatever she is capable of doing to take care of all of us, but she does not get nervous, upset, worried, or stressed out. She is able to do what needs to be done to help others and lets the rest go. We never hear of Kuan Yin getting depressed or having anxiety attacks. She is able to handle everything that happens. We can also become that way.

We can look to Kuan Yin for inspiration while we practice the Dharma. She is the embodiment of and represents great love and great compassion towards all living beings. Kuan Yin was once an ordinary being like one of us, with all of the same confusion and anxiety. Through practicing the path with great effort, she developed such wonderful qualities and became a bodhisattva. If we study the Dharma and practice in the same way, we too can develop qualities just like hers.

Chapter 3

Buddhism in Modern Society

Buddhism in Modern Society

We are extraordinarily fortunate to have the circumstances for Dharma practice that are presently available to us. In both 1993 and 1994, I went to Mainland China on a pilgrimage and visited many temples there. Seeing the situation of Buddhism there made me appreciate the fortune we have here. However, we often take our freedom, material prosperity, spiritual masters, and the Buddha's teachings for granted and are blind to the wonderful opportunity that we have to practice. For example, we take for granted our ability to gather together to learn the Dharma. This is not the case in many places. When I was on a pilgrimage at Jiu Hua Shan, Kshitigarbha's Holy Mountain, the abbess of a nunnery asked me to give a talk to the pilgrims there. But my friends from Shanghai who were traveling with me said, "No, you can't do that. The police will come and all of us will get in trouble." We had to be careful about even an innocent activity like teaching the Dharma. Only when the abbess said that she was a friend of the police did my friends say it was safe for me to teach.

It is important that we reflect on the advantages and good circumstances that we have to practice in right now. Otherwise, we will take them for granted and they will go to waste. We tend to select one or two small problems in

our life, emphasize them, and blow them out of proportion. Then we think, "I can't be happy. I can't practice the Dharma," and this thought itself prevents us from enjoying our life and making it meaningful. We human beings are very funny: when something bad happens in our lives we say, "Why me? Why is this happening to me?" But when we wake up every morning and are alive and healthy and our family is well, we never say, "Why me? Why am I so fortunate?"

Not only should we open our eyes to all the things that are going right in our lives, but also we should recognize that they are results of our own previously-created positive actions or karma. It is helpful to think, "Whoever I was in a previous life, I did a lot of positive actions which make it possible for me to have so many good circumstances now. So in this life, I should also act constructively by being ethical and kind so that in the future such fortune will continue."

Appreciating our advantageous circumstances is as important as appreciating our problems. Why appreciate our problems? Because the difficult situations in our lives are the ones that make us grow the most. Take a minute and think about a difficult time in your life, a time when you had a lot of problems. Didn't you learn something valuable from that experience? You wouldn't be the person you are now without having gone through those difficulties. We may have gone through a painful time in our life, but we came

out the other side with stronger inner resources and a better understanding of life. Seen in this way, even our problems enable us to become better people and aid us on the path to enlightenment.

Before we take refuge in the Three Jewels—the Buddhas, the Dharma, and the Sangha—it is helpful to visualize them in the space in front of us. That is, we imagine the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and arhats in a pure land. We are there, too, surrounded by all sentient beings. A pure land is a place where all the circumstances are conducive to practicing the Dharma. When I visualized being in a Pure Land, I used to imagine only the people I liked and left out the people with whom I felt uncomfortable, threatened, insecure, or fearful. It was nice to imagine being in a place where everything was very pleasant, and it was easy to practice the Dharma.

But one time when I was visualizing the pure land, all the people who were giving me problems were there too! I recognized that if a pure land is a place conducive for Dharma practice, then I also need the people who harm me to be there because they help me to practice. In fact, sometimes those who harm us help us more to practice the Dharma than those who help us. The people who help us, give us gifts, and tell us how wonderful, talented, and intelligent we are often cause us to get puffed up. On the other hand, the people who harm us show us very clearly how much resentment and

jealousy we have and how attached we are to our reputations. They help us to see our attachments and aversions, and they point out the things we need to work on in ourselves. Sometimes they help us even more than our teachers do in this respect.

For example, our Dharma teachers tell us, "Try to forgive other people, try not to be angry. Jealousy and pride are defilements, so try not to follow them because they will cause you and others difficulties." We say, "Yes, yes, that's true. But I don't have those negative qualities. The people who harm me are the ones who are resentful, jealous, and attached!" Even though our Dharma teachers point out our faults to us, we still don't see them. But when people with whom we don't get along point out our faults to us, we have to look at them. We can't run away anymore. When we're outrageously angry or burning with jealousy or when attachment is eating away at us, we can't deny that we have these negative emotions. Of course, we try to say that it's the other person's fault, that we have these horrible emotions only because they made us have them. But after we've listened to the Buddha's teachings, this rationale doesn't work any more. We know in our hearts that our happiness and suffering come from our own minds. Then, even though we try to blame our difficulties on other people, we know we can't. We are forced to look at them ourselves. And when we do, we also see that they are incredible opportunities to grow and learn.

The bodhisattvas, who sincerely wish to practice the Dharma, want to have problems. They want people to criticize them. They want their reputation to get ruined. Why? They see problems as wonderful opportunities to practice. Atisha, a great Bodhisattva in India, helped spread Buddhism to Tibet in the 11th century. When he went to Tibet, he took his Indian cook with him. This cook was very disagreeable, speaking harshly and being rude and obnoxious to people. He even regularly insulted Atisha. The Tibetans asked, "Why did you bring this person with you? We can cook for you. You don't need him!" But Atisha said, "I do need him. I need him to practice patience."

So when someone criticizes me, I think, "He is an incarnation of Atisha's cook." One time I was living in a Dharma center and had big problems with one person there; let's call him Sam. I was so happy when I left that place to go back to the monastery and see my spiritual master. My master knew of my difficulties and asked me, "Who is kinder to you: the Buddha, or Sam?" I immediately replied, "Of course, the Buddha is kinder to me!" My teacher looked disappointed and proceeded to tell me that Sam was actually much kinder to me than the Buddha! Why? Because I couldn't possibly practice patience with the Buddha. I had to practice with Sam, and without practicing patience, there was no way I could become a Buddha, so I actually needed Sam! Of

course, that wasn't what I wanted my teacher to say! I wanted him to say, "Oh, I understand, Sam is a horrible person. He was so mean to you, you poor thing." I wanted sympathy, but my teacher didn't give it to me. This made me wake up and realize that difficult situations are beneficial because they force me to practice and find my inner strength. All of us are going to have problems in our lives. This is the nature of cyclic existence. Remembering this can help us transform our problems into the path to enlightenment.

This is an important aspect of Buddhism in modern society. Dharma practice isn't just coming to the temple; it's not simply reading a Buddhist scripture or chanting the Buddha's name. Practice is how we live our lives, how we live with our family, how we work together with our colleagues, how we relate to other people in the country and on the planet. We need to bring the Buddha's teachings on loving-kindness into our workplace, into our family, even into the grocery store and the gym. We do this not by handing out leaflets on a street corner but by practicing and living the Dharma ourselves. When we do, automatically we will have a positive influence on the people around us. For example, we teach our children loving-kindness, forgiveness, and patience not only by telling them, but also by showing them in our behavior. If we tell our children one thing but act in the opposite way, they are going to follow what we do, not what we say.

If we're not careful, it is easy to teach our children to hate and never to forgive when others harm them. Look at the situation in the former Yugoslavia: it is a good example of how, both in the family and in the schools, adults taught children to hate. When those children grew up, they taught their children to hate. Generation after generation, this went on, and look what happened. There is so much suffering there; it's very sad. Sometimes you may teach children to hate another part of the family. Maybe your grandparents quarreled with their brothers and sisters, and since then, the different sides of the family don't speak to each other. Something happened years before you were born, and you don't even know what the event was, but because of it, you're not supposed to speak to certain relatives. Then you teach that to your children and grandchildren. They learn that the solution to quarreling with someone is never to speak to them again. Is that going to help them to be happy and kind people? You should think deeply about this and make sure you teach your children only what is valuable.

This is why it's so important that you exemplify in your behavior what you want your children to learn. When you find resentment, anger, grudges, or belligerence in your heart, you have to work on those, not only for your own inner peace but also for your children, so you don't teach them to have those harmful emotions. Because you love your children,

try also to love yourself. Loving yourself and wanting yourself to be happy mean you develop a kind heart for the benefit of everybody in the family.

We need to bring loving-kindness not only into the family but also into the schools. Before I became a nun, I was a schoolteacher, so I have especially strong feelings about this. The most important thing for children to learn is not a lot of information but how to be kind human beings and how to resolve their conflicts with others in a constructive way. Parents and teachers put a lot of time and money into teaching children science, arithmetic, literature, geography, geology, and computers. But do we ever spend any time teaching them how to be kind? Do we have any courses in kindness? Do we teach kids how to work with their own negative emotions and how to resolve conflicts with others? I think this is much more important than the academic subjects. Why? Children may know a lot, but if they grow up to be unkind, resentful, or greedy adults, their lives will not be happy.

Parents want their children to have a good future and thus think that their children need to make a lot of money. They teach their children academic and technical skills so that they can get a good job and make lots of money—as if money were the cause of happiness. But when people are on their deathbeds, you never hear anybody wishfully saying, “I should have spent more time in the office. I should have

made more money." When people have regrets about how they lived their lives, usually they regret not communicating better with other people, not being kinder, or not letting the people that they care about know that they care. If you want your kids to have a good future, don't teach them just how to make money but how to live a healthy life, how to be a happy person, how to contribute to society in a productive way.

As a parent, you have to model this. Let's say your children come home and say, "Mom and Dad, I want designer jeans; I want new rollerblades; I want this and I want that because all the other kids have it." You say to your children, "Those things won't make you happy. You don't need them. It won't make you happy to keep up with the Lee's." But then you go out and buy all the things that everybody else has, even though your house is already filled with things you don't use. In this case, what you are saying and what you are doing are contradictory. You tell your children to share with other children, yet you don't give things to charities for the poor and needy. Look at the homes in this country: they are filled with things we don't use but can't give away. Why not? We're afraid that if we give something away, we might need it in the future. We find it difficult to share our things, but we teach children that they should share. A simple way to teach your children generosity is to give away all the things you haven't used in the last year. If all four seasons have

gone by and we haven't used something, we probably won't use it the next year either. There are many people who are poor and can use those things, and it would help ourselves, our children, and the other people if we gave those things away.

Another way to teach your children kindness is not to buy everything that you want. Instead, save the money, and give it to a charity or to somebody who is in need. You can show your children through your own example that accumulating more and more material things doesn't bring happiness and that it's more important to share with others.

Along this line, we need to teach children about the environment and recycling. Taking care of the environment that we share with other living beings is part of the practice of loving kindness. If we destroy the environment, we harm others. For example, if we use a lot of disposable things and don't recycle them but just throw them away, what are we giving to future generations? They will inherit from us bigger garbage dumps. I'm very happy to see more people reusing and recycling things. It is an important part of our Buddhist practice and an activity in which temples and Dharma centers should take the lead.

The Buddha did not comment directly on many things in our modern society—such as recycling—because those things didn't exist at his time. But he talked about principles that we can apply to our present situations. These principles

can guide us in deciding how to act in many new situations that didn't exist 2,500 years ago.

However, the Buddha did talk directly about intoxicants and discouraged us from using them. At the time of the Buddha, the chief intoxicant was alcohol. However, extrapolating on the principle he set down, the advice against intoxicants also refers to using recreational drugs or misusing tranquilizers. If we take this a step further, we have to observe our relationship to the biggest intoxicant in our society: television. As a society, we are addicted to TV. For example, after getting home from work, we're tired and want to relax. What do we do? We sit down, turn on the TV, and space out for hours, until we finally fall asleep in front of it. Our precious human life, with its potential to become a fully enlightened Buddha, gets wasted in front of the TV! Sometimes certain TV programs—for example, those with a lot of violence—are far worse intoxicants than alcohol and drugs. By the time a child is 15 years old, he has seen thousands of people die on the television. We're intoxicating our children with a violent view of life. Parents need to select the TV programs they watch with a lot of care and, in that way, be an example to their children.

Another big intoxicant is shopping. You may be surprised to hear this, but some psychologists are now researching the addiction to shopping. When some people feel depressed, they

drink or use drugs. Other people go to the shopping center and buy something. It's the same mechanism: we avoid looking at our problems and deal with our uncomfortable emotions by external means. Some people are compulsive shoppers. Even when they don't need anything, they go to the mall and just look around. Then they buy something but return home still feeling empty inside.

We also intoxicate ourselves by eating too much or eating too little. In other words, we handle our uncomfortable emotions by using food. I often joke that in America, the Three Jewels of Refuge are the TV , the shopping center, and the refrigerator. That's where we turn when we need help! But these objects of refuge don't bring us happiness and, in fact, make us more confused. If we can turn our mind to the Buddhas, the Dharma, and the Sangha, we'll be a lot happier in the long run. Even in this moment, our spiritual practice can help us. For example, when we are tired or stressed out, we can relax our mind by chanting the Buddha's name or by bowing to the Buddha. While doing this, we imagine the Buddha in front of us and think that much radiant and peaceful light stream from the Buddha into us. This light fills our entire body-mind and makes us very relaxed and at ease. After doing this for a few minutes, we feel refreshed. This is much cheaper and easier than taking refuge in the TV , shopping mall, and refrigerator. Try it!

Chapter 4
Questions and
Answers

Questions and Answers

Q: Is it better to meditate in the morning or the evening?

A: It is good to meditate morning and evening, if you can. It is helpful to start the day off by meditating and developing a good motivation, and it is good to close the day by reviewing our activities and attitudes, rejoicing at the constructive ones, and purifying the ones that need to be improved. However, some people may only have time for a formal sitting once a day. In that case, select the time best for you. Some people meditate better in the morning and some people meditate better in the evening. The mind tends to be clearer in the morning, so in general, it is good to meditate then.

It is good to have a fixed time each day to meditate. Our family then knows that that time is reserved for us to be quiet and get in touch with ourselves. Having a fixed time each day prevents thinking, "I don't have time now, but I'll meditate later," because when we procrastinate, the meditation tends never to get done. We're too busy all day, and in the evening we say, "I'm too exhausted. I'll meditate tomorrow morning." Then, it never happens. So it is very important to set this up as part of your routine that you do everyday

without fail. No matter whether you are happy or sad, feeling well or tired or sick, you do your meditation. For example, I travel a lot and have learned to meditate almost anywhere. On a plane, I sit back with my eyes closed. Other people think I'm sleeping, but I'm not—unless I fall asleep while meditating! In other words, meditation becomes part of your life, and you do it wherever you are.

Q: When we meditate on the breath, should the pace of our breath be the same as normal, or should it be longer, deeper, and slower?

A: There may be differences in the way that various teachers or traditions give instructions for the meditation on the breath. My teachers emphasized breathing in a normal way, without deliberately making the breath longer, deeper, or slower. It is important, however, to breathe in a healthy way, that is, from our diaphragm. When we are nervous or stressed, we breathe from the top of our chest, and not much air can enter our lungs. It's easy to develop an unhealthy habit of breathing like this. So make sure your diaphragm is moving, and your belly is going in and out when you are inhaling and exhaling respectively, but don't force the breath or deep-breathe.

Q: If we do the breathing meditation to calm our mind, will this develop our compassionate heart?

A: Our minds are very complex and have many different aspects to them. Therefore, His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that one meditation method alone is not sufficient to develop all aspects of ourselves. It is best to learn a variety of meditations because each one deals with a different aspect of our minds. Of course, they are all interrelated, but each meditation has its own specialty. For example, when you are very flustered and restless, it is good to do the breathing meditation to settle your mind down. After your mind is calmer, you can do other meditations, such as the meditation on the kindness of others or the meditation on love, wishing sentient beings to be well and happy. Or you can meditate on emptiness to develop the wisdom to understand reality.

Chanting the Buddha's name can also help us settle our minds down and develop concentration. While we chant, we can contemplate the qualities of the Buddhas, Dharma, and Sangha. This develops our faith, confidence, and refuge in them. Over time, we will gradually develop a daily meditation practice and learn different meditations that the Buddha taught. In this way, we will have a variety of techniques to draw upon to tame the various disturbing attitudes in our minds.

Q: As a teacher, how can I teach children to meditate?

A: Teaching children how to be kind people helps both the individual child and society in general. You can discuss these topics with the children without calling it Buddhism. Many of the things the Buddha taught are not religious at all. They are simply common sense, and, in that way, you can easily discuss them with children and people who are not Buddhists. For example, there is nothing religious about observing our breath. It doesn't matter whether you are Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist because everybody breathes. Thus, you can teach children how to meditate on the breath and calm their minds. Make the meditation short, so they have a good experience.

You can also talk to them about the kindness of others and our interdependence on each other. Children shouldn't always have to hear about the wars their ancestors fought. They can also learn how they cooperated and worked together for the benefit of the group. In a social studies class, you can dwell on how people help each other in society and ask the children to tell stories about who has helped them and whom they have helped. In the case of teenagers, you can discuss Buddhist approaches to working with emotions in a psychology class. This presents them with a healthy way to relate to

emotions and to resolve any pain or harm experienced in the past.

One time I was a guest speaker at a high school. I talked about emotions, relationships with parents, and expectations. The kids really opened up, and we had an incredible discussion about anger. They found an adult with whom they could talk about their anger without being judged. Even the teacher was amazed at how open, honest, and sensitive the students were.

Q: From a Buddhist perspectives, how do we handle grief when a dear one has died?

A: We have to acknowledge our sadness. But instead of concentrating just on our own sadness, let's remember that it is the other person who has died and is facing new and perhaps confusing experiences. Our lives continue more or less normally, while they face much greater change. We need to turn our emphasis to the person who died. To help them, we do spiritual practices or make offerings on their behalf, so we are still relating to them, but with a kind heart, not with worry. We dedicate all the positive potential from these practices and offerings so that they can have a good rebirth, meet the Dharma, meet fully-qualified spiritual masters, and be able to attain enlightenment quickly. When we shift the emphasis to the other person, it helps us work through our

own grief.

Feelings of sadness when you have lost somebody don't go away quickly. Sometimes very small incidents will remind you of the person. You may even start to cry in the middle of a supermarket because you passed down an aisle and saw his favorite food. It's good to acknowledge our own grief, but not to get stuck in it. Instead, we can turn our thoughts towards the other person and wish him well wherever he's born. Let's pray for him to have a happy rebirth and be able to practice Buddhist teachings.

Q: I like my pet a lot and hope that he can someday be reborn as a human being. How can I help him to do this?

A: It is very helpful to do our prayers out loud, so the animals hear. For example, chant the Buddha's name when you feed your pets. Even though they don't understand, this puts positive imprints in their minds, which will help them in future lives. People often talk to their pets, even though they don't understand our human language, and the pets react to the loving tone of voice. Instead of talking nonsense to their pets, they can talk about Dharma to them.

One of the great Indian sages of past centuries lived in a cave and chanted the Abhidharma scriptures every day. A pigeon that perched outside the cave heard the entire scriptures.

Later, that pigeon was reborn as a human being, came to study with the sage, and, without much effort, became an expert on Abhidharma. In this way, chanting the Buddha's name or reading Buddhist scriptures out loud can help your pets. It can also help when your baby is crying. One father told me that when his child cries, he chants mantra, and it calms the baby. Also, the chanting affects you, and your energy influences your baby positively.

Q: How can we handle the anxiety that arises from making decisions?

A: Anxiety when making decisions often comes because we look at the situation from the viewpoint: "How can I get the most pleasure possible? Which of these 15 choices will give me the most pleasure and release me from the most pain?" That makes us very uptight because we do not know the future. "Maybe this will make me happy; maybe that will make me happy. I don't know which one will make me the happiest, so I am confused and unhappy now, trying to decide."

Sometimes the anxiety arises because we think there must be one right decision, and we don't know which one it is. This is a very limiting view because the unfolding of karma is very complex, and the future is unknown because it hasn't happened yet. It's better to let go of the idea of one

right choice and instead, be mindful and kind in whatever situation we find ourselves.

When faced with a decision, I try to use ethics as criteria. I explore, "Could any of these choices cause me to get involved in unethical behavior, bring out my negative qualities, or make me create negative karma? Are there some options that would propel me to act constructively or to generate positive attitudes?" In other words, I use ethical conduct as criteria for making a decision.

Another criterion is the benefit the various options would have for others. "In the long-term, what will be the most beneficial for others?" This viewpoint makes the mind more relaxed and is a lot more expansive than thinking, "What will bring me the most pleasure now?"

Q: How do we deal with the anxiety that comes from uncertainty about the future?

A: Almost everyone can relate to this concern because nothing is certain in our life. Things are not fixed, permanent, or predictable. This is the nature of samsara, or cyclic existence. One of the disadvantages of cyclic existence that the Buddha described is insecurity in uncertainty. Because our minds are under the influence of ignorance, anger, and attachment, we suffer from not being able to control what happens to us. We

can influence the world around us, but we cannot control it. We cannot make the external environment be what we want it to be.

The first step is to recognize that uncertainty is the nature of things. None of us ordinary beings know the future. Understanding this has two effects: first, it leads us to a greater determination to free ourselves from cyclic existence and thus to seek the wisdom that realizes reality in order to eliminate the ignorance, anger, and attachment that keep us bound in cyclic existence. Second, it helps us accept the fact that change is part of life. When things are uncertain, I say to myself, "Yes, this is exactly what the Buddha taught. Things are impermanent. This is the nature of life. If I accept this, I will be less anxious than if I constantly fight it, wanting to control everything and make it predictable. I have to relax into the fact that we are not in control and that everyone is in this predicament. This is not just my problem; everybody has this problem." Remembering that dealing with uncertainty is a universal problem takes the stress out of thinking that it is just my dilemma.

In addition, we can take refuge in the Buddhas, Dharma, and Sangha when we are anxious about the future. Turning our hearts towards the spiritual guidance that the Three Jewels provide relieves us of anxiety as well.

Q: If everything is impermanent, how do we set goals in our lives?

A: Although everything is impermanent and transient, we do need some kind of goal and vision in our lives. Within that vision, we also need flexibility in case things do not work out exactly as planned. In other words, our view is, "I'm directing my energy this way, but it will be flexible because other factors that I can't see now will be in play." Circumstances may change, and we may find that things do not occur as we had planned and hoped. The end result may even be better! Try not to hold onto a rigid idea, "I have to do this in order to be successful." Try to think, "Maybe something else will happen, and if I'm open, it could be better than what I aimed for." You can direct your energy toward something and be flexible at the same time.

Q: My understanding is that we should understand and take care of ourselves before we try to take care of others. When the Buddha talked about cherishing others more than ourselves, was he saying we should neglect ourselves and only think of others?

A: We need to take care of ourselves in a healthy way, not

in a neurotic way. In Buddhism, we don't ignore ourselves. In fact, we are trying to become more aware of ourselves, but not in a worried, anxious, how-am-I-going-to-get-everything-I-want way. For example, it is healthy to ask ourselves, "What am I feeling?" "What really makes me happy?" and "What is the true cause of my pain?" By investigating these, we will understand ourselves better and have a clearer mind and a more open heart. Taking care of ourselves in this way is different from "taking care" of ourselves in an unhealthy way, worrying all the time about "me, me, me" and "how am I going to get what fulfills my needs?" That kind of "care" does not make us happy. It just makes us more confused.

One of the major elements of the path is to develop the determination to be free from cyclic existence. Here we are renouncing our sufferings and their causes and determining to take a positive direction in life. Although this step is often called "renunciation," it means having compassion for ourselves. We sincerely want ourselves to be happy and to be free of suffering, so we want to give up our sufferings and their causes and to attain nirvana.

When following the bodhisattva path, we want to work for the benefit of all sentient beings. We are sentient beings, too, aren't we? We have to include ourselves when we work for all sentient beings.

Q: Sometimes we get lost in theories and concepts and spend too much time intellectualizing about Buddhism. How do we get down to living it?

A: Yes, sometimes we do get lost. A daily meditation practice is very helpful to prevent and counteract this because as we meditate, we learn to detect when we are getting wrapped up in our intellectualized concepts. Another way to detect and to stop it is to have a good relationship with your teacher. Then your teacher will help you see when your mind is playing games.

When we read Buddhist books, we shouldn't read them quickly, simply searching for new facts and knowledge about the Dharma. Instead, we should read a little, put the book down and think about what we read, applying it to our lives. Then we can read a bit more and contemplate that. In this way, we will ensure that we will always make the Dharma relevant to our lives.

Q: My teenagers constantly come home late. As a parent, I know I can't control it, but how do I tell myself this is not the result of my irresponsible actions?

A: As a parent, you nurtured your child from the time he or she was helpless and completely dependent on you. At

that time, you were responsible for every aspect of the baby's life. But as your child grows up and becomes more independent, he gradually assumes that responsibility, and you are no longer responsible for every aspect of his life. Letting go of this is one of the challenges of parenting.

As a parent, you want your children to be happy and not to suffer. Thus you teach them skills to deal with different situations. But you can't follow them around their whole lives to protect them from suffering. That's impossible, and it would be pretty miserable too! Would you want to follow your teenager around 24 hours a day? Our parents wanted us to be happy, but they had to let us live our own lives. They taught us skills, and in spite of all the mistakes we've made, we have managed to stay alive. We've dealt with our mistakes, learned from them, and moved on. This will happen to your children, too.

It's hard to watch somebody you love — your child, spouse, parent, or friend — make a mistake. Sometimes there is nothing we can do to prevent it. We just have to be there and afterwards, help him learn from his mistake.

Talk to your teenagers about things they are interested in, whether or not those things interest you. Don't just talk to them about getting good grades and keeping their room clean. Talk to them about sports or the latest fashion. Keep the doors of communication open.

Q: What are the Buddhist views on abortion and on teenage pregnancy?

A: In American society, there is a huge debate between those who favor pro-choice and those who favor pro-life. Each side says their position is right and attacks the other. Each group says their view is right because they care the most about others. However, I do not see much caring or compassion in this debate. Rather, both the pro-lifers and the pro-choicers are angry. Neither has much compassion, which is unfortunate, because in the case of unwanted pregnancy, compassion is direly needed. Everyone in the situation needs compassion—the mother, the father, the child, and the society. Unwanted pregnancy is difficult for everybody. Rather than having a judgmental attitude, we need to bring our compassion to the forefront.

From a Buddhist viewpoint, life starts at the time of conception. Thus abortion is taking life. But condemning people who have abortions does not benefit anyone. We need to give the parents, or at least the mother, support and understanding in the case of unwanted pregnancy. If we do, there will be a greater chance for the child to be born. Then, the baby can be adopted or given to another family to raise. If we, as a society, can give support rather than judgmental

criticism, it could help save the lives of those children. I say this because it has touched my life directly. My younger sister was adopted as a newborn. She was the result of an unwanted pregnancy. But instead of having an abortion, her birth mother gave birth. Because of that, I am able to have a sister whom I love very much. I'm very grateful for that.

Here we have to look at the issue of teens being sexually active. They learn to use their sexuality responsibly in two ways. First, adults must model wise sexual conduct. That means that both parents are faithful to each other and do not have relationships with other people. Second, adults must discuss sex and birth control with their children, or if they do not feel comfortable doing so, they should ask other adults to do so. If parents simply say, "Don't have sex, but we don't want to talk about it any further," then from whom will teenagers learn? From magazines, from television, from all the stories they hear from their friends? Adults need to give them some good and accurate information and not be so shy about it.

Another factor which encourages teens to use their sexuality wisely is an atmosphere of love and acceptance at home. If they don't feel loved and accepted by their parents, sex becomes more appealing because at least then somebody is caring about them. It's very difficult to tell teens who don't feel loved or accepted, "Don't have sexual relations," because

they desperately want to feel close to other human beings. Emotionally, they crave affection, and in addition, the hormones in their bodies are making sexual desire arise. Both of these factors contribute to their sexual activity. If people create a more loving environment within families where parents talk with and spend time with their children instead of just telling them what to do, the children will feel supported by and bonded to their family. Then they won't have as much emotional need to be sexually active.

Q: I am a therapist and have several Chinese clients. When I ask them, "Have you communicated with your teenage children about sex?" they say, "We never touch the subject, because if we tell them about birth control, they will do it more."

A: Although some people think in this way, I do not believe this is the case. Each of us has lived through adolescence. I don't think learning about birth control would have propelled me to be more sexually active. Rather, it would have made me more responsible. Accurate information about sexual functions and birth control enable teens and young adults to think more clearly about these beforehand. They will take proper precautions and think about situations before they happen. For example, they will know that even if they use birth control, pregnancy could still occur. That could make

them check, "Am I ready to become a parent?" and "Do I really care about this other person?" By thinking about these things, they will learn to discriminate and make good choices.

Q: What happens to the soul of an aborted baby?

A: In Buddhism, we use the word "mind" rather than "soul." While "soul" connotes a permanent entity, "mind" or "mindstream" refers to the continuity of consciousness coming from previous lives into this life and continuing on to future lives. From Buddhists' viewpoints we have all died many times, and we have all been born many times. Death from abortion is like any other death in that the person's mindstream will continue on to another life and will be reborn. But because of the method used to perform the abortion, the baby's death is abrupt and harsh, and dying in that violent way is very different from having a peaceful death.

Various spiritual practices can be done for a baby who was aborted or miscarried, or for people who die due to accident, old age, or disease. By transforming our minds through these practices, we create positive potential that we then dedicate so that the person can have a good rebirth, for example, as a precious human life with all the conducive circumstances for Dharma practice or a rebirth in a pure land.

If someone has had an abortion, it is good to do purification

practices to eliminate the imprint of that action on her own mind. Through generating the four opponent forces to purify negative karma, she can avoid experiencing unhappy results that follow from taking life. These four are: 1) regretting the action, 2) taking refuge in the Three Jewels and generating the altruistic intention, 3) making the determination not to do the action again, and 4) engaging in some remedial action. By doing these sincerely and repeatedly, she can neutralize any and all negative karma she has created.

Q: What is the Buddhist view on euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide?

A: This question, too, speaks about a very difficult situation. The Buddha was very clear about not taking life, even if the other person does not wish to live any longer. I feel it is very sad if somebody gets to the point when he doesn't see value in his own life. Human life is very precious, even when one's body does not function well. We need to help people see that their lives have purpose and meaning, even when they are terminally ill.

Dharma practice is especially valuable when we are ill. Not only does it relieve the mental stress of the illness, but also it relieves the physical pain. In addition, since Dharma practice occurs on the mental level, we can do it even when

our body is not well. When we explain this to those who are ill, they do not feel so desolate and depressed. Understanding karma, they will see the value in putting good karmic imprints in their mindstreams even when they are sick because it helps to ease the death process and prepares for future lives. This is why it is beneficial to chant the Buddha's name, read Buddhist scriptures, talk about the Dharma, or meditate in the presence of the ill or dying person. In this way, the ill person will see the value of remaining alive in order to plant more of these peaceful and positive seeds in his mindstream, either through his own Dharma practice or by others practicing around him.

Pulling the plug from a life-support machine is very different from not putting somebody on a machine to start with. Pulling the plug is actively aiding or assisting death while not putting the person on a life support system is simply letting nature take its course and is not violating the first precept.

Some people would prefer not to be put on a life support system if they are severely injured or incapacitated by an illness. If you feel that way, it is important to write a living will and to tell your family members your directives in case you are not capable of making them known later. In that way, your dear ones will not be put in the uncomfortable position of having to decide.

We all feel, "I'm not going to die soon. I will live for

a long time so I'll write my living will later." However, we do not know how long we will live. I made a living will, stating not only my preferences regarding medical treatment in case of severe illness or accident, but also the spiritual practices to do and the people I want there to guide me spiritually. In that way, people will know what to do if I am incapacitated.

Q: If you are a Buddhist, must you be a strict vegetarian?

A: There is no firm rule because people practice in different ways and at different levels. I think it is very helpful to be vegetarian. It saves the lives of many animals, and it is good for your own health. But I don't think we should be "born-again" vegetarians and force our beliefs on other people.

Q: What is enlightenment? How does it differ from the Christian goal of heaven?

A: From the Buddhist viewpoint, being born in a heavenly realm only temporarily prevents suffering. In the Christian sense, heaven is forever, but from the Buddhist viewpoint, it does not last forever. Heavenly rebirth is only temporary because when the karma causing that rebirth is consumed, the person must leave that realm and be reborn somewhere

else again. This is why heaven is not the final goal in Buddhism. Buddhism speaks of two definitive goals: liberation and enlightenment. Both of these are states of mind, not places. Liberation or nirvana is the state of having removed all the disturbing attitudes, their seeds, and the karmic imprints that cause uncontrolled rebirth in cyclic existence. At this point, one becomes an arhat. To attain enlightenment or Buddhahood, we go one step further and generate the altruistic intention to become a Buddha in order to benefit all sentient beings most effectively (bodhicitta). With this motivation, we engage in practices to eliminate the subtle stains on our mindstreams in addition to the obscurations mentioned above.

Enlightenment has two basic qualities. One is that all the defilements have been completely purified. That means, for example, that we will never get angry again. This occurs not because nobody harms us but because all the anger and its seeds have been cleansed from our mindstream in such a way that they can never return. Enlightened beings do not become attached or obsessed with their bodies, possessions, or dear ones. They are never again overwhelmed by jealousy or pride, nor do they think or act selfishly because all those things have been purified from their mindstreams.

The other quality of enlightenment is that all good qualities have been fully developed. At present, we have some love and compassion, but when we become Buddhas, these qualities

will be completely developed. They will be spontaneous, effortless, and constant, as will the qualities of generosity, ethical discipline, patience, joyous effort, concentration, and wisdom. At the present, we have to make an effort to be kind, but when we have trained our minds well and have reached the end of the path, kindness will arise in us automatically. In addition, a Buddha has the capacity to manifest in many different ways and appear in many different forms in order to benefit sentient beings. Such qualities enable a Buddha to help others so skillfully and fully. In other words, we are capable of developing within ourselves all these qualities that we admire so much. Once we become enlightened, these wonderful qualities will never fade away.

Let's dedicate the positive potential that we and others have created so that each and every living being can become a fully enlightened Buddha. Dedicate so that each living being will develop a heart of kindness, appreciation, and love. Let's dedicate so that all beings can live peacefully, not only with each other, but also within their own hearts.



Ven. Thubten Chodron

Born in 1950, Thubten Chodron graduated with a B.A. in History from the University of California at Los Angeles in 1971. After travelling extensively in Europe, North Africa, and Asia, she did post-graduate work in Education while working as a teacher in the Los Angeles City School System. In 1975, she attended a meditation course given by Ven. Lama Yeshe and Ven. Lama Zopa Rinpoche, and finding that Buddha's teachings responded to her philosophical questions as well as helped her in her daily life, she went to Nepal to continue to study and practice the teachings. In 1977, she received the sramanerika ordination, and in 1986, the bhikshuni ordination. She studied and practiced Buddhism for many years in India and Nepal, and later, at Buddhist centers in Europe. She has taught Buddhism and meditation in several European countries, U.S.A., Hong Kong, and Singapore.

**With bad advisors forever left behind,
From paths of evil he departs for eternity,
Soon to see the Buddha of Limitless Light
And perfect Samantabhadra's Supreme Vows.**

**The supreme and endless blessings
of Samantabhadra's deeds,
I now universally transfer.
May every living being, drowning and adrift,
Soon return to the Pure Land of
Limitless Light!**

~The Vows of Samantabhadra~

**I vow that when my life approaches its end,
All obstructions will be swept away;
I will see Amitabha Buddha,
And be born in His Western Pure Land of
Ultimate Bliss and Peace.**

**When reborn in the Western Pure Land,
I will perfect and completely fulfill
Without exception these Great Vows,
To delight and benefit all beings.**

**~The Vows of Samantabhadra
Avatamsaka Sutra~**

DEDICATION OF MERIT

May the merit and virtue
accrued from this work
adorn Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land,
repay the four great kindnesses above,
and relieve the suffering of
those on the three paths below.

May those who see or hear of these efforts
generate Bodhi-mind,
spend their lives devoted to the Buddha Dharma,
and finally be reborn together in
the Land of Ultimate Bliss.
Homage to Amita Buddha!

NAMO AMITABHA

南無阿彌陀佛

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Thanks for your co-operation.
Namo Amitabha!



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