

THREE TEACHINGS:

Retreat, Mahamudra, Mindfulness

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Introduction

These three talks were delivered in Singapore during May 1999 at various Dharma centres. The audiences were mainly comprised of Chinese middle class professionals who, within their highly pressured and stressful lives, are searching—in ever increasing numbers—for a viable means to counteract the relentless strain of the daily round and bring some peace and clarity into their lives. They are reaching out to find a spiritual dimension to their otherwise empty, though materially prosperous, existence.

When I face an audience my main intention is how to say something that will be of use and benefit. Not just words that will be intellectually challenging or emotionally satisfying, but instruction that can be used and that will encourage people to try to help themselves—and others. The audience is usually not made up mainly of monks, nuns and hermits as it would have been in the past! It is an audience of ordinary people with families, professions and normal social obligations. Therefore it is appropriate to talk as though they are people who have outwardly renounced the world and have nothing to do all day but formal Dharma practice.

The fact is that these often sincere and dedicated Dharma followers who have very little time for formal practice. So I try to find words that will be of help and encouragement to people in this situation because otherwise the Dharma would have no meaning for them. In the past in some traditions there tends to have been an over-emphasis on sitting meditation as the sole means to enlightenment and daily life with family and work has been seen as an obstacle to practice. To redress this imbalance, it needs to be pointed out that our everyday lives—when lived with awareness and open-heartedness—are the very basis of our Dharma practice. Our relationships and the daily round are the means by which we cultivate the qualities needed on the path.

So these talks are not sophisticated expositions of Buddhist philosophy nor detailed instruction on meditation practice. They are simply words of encouragement to remind ordinary people that we all have the potential for inner transformation and we can all do it if we would only try.

Tenzin Palmo

The First Teaching

Retreat

Basically, there are two essential qualities that we require in Buddhist practice. The first is that we be able to withdraw from society for a time, be it a few hours, a few days, a few months or a few years. The other requirement is being able to take whatever we have gained from our experience of isolation and bring it back to the world—to our relationships and into our everyday life. Like breathing in and breathing out, we need both.

Sometimes people are very impressed by hearing about the merit of retreats—three years, seven years, life-long retreats—and we have the idea that maybe if we could do that too, then we could really get somewhere. But we are ordinary people. We can't do that, so we feel that there is not much hope that our practice will become very profound.

But actually, it is not so much the quantity as the quality that counts. Anyone can sit in a three-year retreat with a distracted mind and not gain very much from it. Or anyone can sit for a three day retreat, very focused on what one is doing in the practice, and even in three days can experience some transformation. So I think it's not a matter of the length of time, or how

many mantras you do, how many prostrations you do, how many this, how many that. It is not a spiritual bank account that we are trying to accumulate. The important question we always have to ask is—fundamentally, has there been any change?

The great pandita of the 11th century said that the critical issue of judging any kind of retreat practice is whether at the end of it our negative emotions—our anger, our greed, the basic delusions of our mind—has been lessened or not. Even if we have been in retreat for 12 years, nothing has been attained if we still have the same internal problems, the same anger, the same clinging to things, the same attachment and greed, the same basic delusion of the mind.

It doesn't matter how many millions of mantras we have done, how many inner tantras we have accomplished. This is very important. All these practices are nothing if they do not transform the mind. If the mind is the same as the one we went in with, we have not progressed. Even worse, perhaps we are very proud because we feel we are great practitioners now. We are very pleased with ourselves, and we say, "I have done that retreat and I'm expert in this practice". In fact, that is adding defilements on top of the ones which we have not managed to remove. We now have new ones!

Please understand that this is very, very important. Any practice that we do is for aiding the mind, transforming the mind so that we can genuinely help

others. If this doesn't happen, and we just become kind of smart and satisfied that we are such good Dharma practitioners because we do three hours of meditation every day, always do our practice and let everyone know how often we do our practice and how early we get up—then what is the use? Do you understand?

Ego

The whole of our Dharma practice is to reduce our Ego, not to increase it. We have to be careful of this. It is not good to become a professional Dharma person, making sure that everybody sees we are very spiritual, we are such good vegetarians, we never smoke, we don't go to karaoke bars, we are not like those worldly people. We are professional spiritual people. We are very pleased with ourselves.

Of course the Ego loves this. Ego really pets itself. "Look at me, I'm such a superior person to these deluded people around me, I'm so much more disciplined, I'm so much more controlled."

So we have to watch. We have to be careful that in the Dharma practice our intention is quite pure. Because our delusion and our tricky Ego can end up actually reinforcing the very problems which we are trying to eradicate. It just becomes another way for the Ego to sit back and feel very good. This is going to

happen with people who do retreats; they will have a sense of self-satisfaction that they have done this kind of practice.

The Benefit of Retreats

Having said that, it is very good to take time out from our everyday lives, spend the whole day and what we can of the night totally concentrated on our spiritual practice and not be distracted during this time by our ordinary daily concerns. There is no doubt this can be extremely beneficial.

There is the question then of whether it is more beneficial to go into group retreat or solitary retreat. I personally would suggest that we start with group retreats. In a group retreat you have the support of everyone else around you. Also, because everybody is sitting in a group, you can't start dithering around or suddenly think, "Oh, this is useless," and go make a cup of tea. You have to sit, however you are feeling. Even if you wake up in the morning with a headache, you still have to sit. You can think of thousands of things you have to do, but you still have to sit. It reinforces the discipline.

Perhaps if one has never done a retreat before and one starts on ones own, it's very easy for it to start off quite strong and than get weaker and weaker and

in the end it doesn't exist any more. In a group that doesn't happen. Also, in a group there is usually a group leader or a teacher and that is also very helpful, because the teacher will co-ordinate everyone's effort in the same direction and give instructions and advice. If you have problems, there is someone you can ask.

If one is by oneself, then there are problems. One may or may not be disciplined, or one may be too disciplined and force oneself too much. Also, dealing with the mind is always a very delicate operation. In one way, the whole of the universe is contained within our own mind; we have infinite levels, infinite depths. Normally we access just a very, very small and shallow level of the mind's potential. So during a retreat when we are giving all our attention to our practice, when the surface of the mind begins to calm down, it opens up the flood gates of all kinds of experiences and many unknown levels of the psyche. We have not had access to this before, and what is happening can be very frightening. Even good experiences can be frightening. You don't know what the mind is going to throw out.

In the mind there are both angels and devils, and one doesn't know which one is coming through the open gateways. Therefore it is very beneficial initially when one is practicing to be in the hands of qualified teachers to guide one, and to be in the company of others. If initially one thinks to do an intensive retreat,

one would be advised to do so in the company of others.

This is because then one learns how to practice correctly and learns the kind of pace which we should adopt in our practice. Because this is also another point. There has to be a balance between being too lax—you know, not putting enough effort into it, not spending enough time on it in which case not much will be achieved—and pushing too hard. On the whole, for most people who are in retreat by themselves, the fault is usually the second one. People push themselves too hard. Our expectations of what we should be achieving are too high and unrealistic.

On Achievement

A word about achieving. You know, Singaporeans feel they must always be achieving. “I must achieve something, I’m going to get something out of it in this retreat, right. Got to do it.” That is very counter-productive. It just creates more tension in the mind, more stress. These qualities of mind of wanting to achieve, of wanting to get something, are tremendous barriers in themselves. And usually people just end up with what we call Loong—a kind of imbalance of Qi, when the subtle elements of the body become completely unbalanced. Then people can be very sick. They get

violent headaches, they feel very ill—they feel very angry, irritable and tense.

It's quite a serious thing because when that happens, it is very difficult to do any practice. Any practice one does will make it worse. It's like a vicious circle, because then when you do some practice, you get more tense. Then that tension will create more Loong and it will just go round and round and round. So it's very important when we practice, to be really in tune with our inner sense of what is appropriate, and not to have an outer goal that we are trying to achieve.

We are not taking a business attitude into the Dharma realms. The whole idea of achievement is Ego, and we are trying to drop all that. "I did a hundred million mantras, they only did ten." We are back again to this quantity issue of "I did this much, I accomplished that much." This is totally counter-productive. This is not what we are meant to be doing, carrying that worldly Ego-driven mind frame into our Dharma practice. We are trying to see through that, relax the mind and learn how to drop and see through the Ego and all the Ego's aims and goals.

Somebody asked the lama, "What is the aim and goal of meditation?" He replied, "In a way, meditation is dealing with the very idea of having an aim." Why don't we sit and practice the practice, just because it's a nice thing to do and not because we want to achieve anything? We don't want to get anything out of it, we

just find it nice to sit. Really, it's just very nice to sit, do your practice, do your meditation—what could be a nicer thing to do? That in itself is enough, and if we can relax our mind but at the same time completely absorb ourselves into our practice because we enjoy doing it, then the results will take care of themselves.

So we mustn't look at the retreat situation as a kind of tutorial intensive before the exam. It's a time to really just be completely knowing what we are doing right now, and just doing it.

Opening The Mind to the Beauty of Practice

On this subject, I also have to add that it is very helpful to encourage our mind to co-operate. If in our practice our mind is resisting, is bored, is pushed to do something just because you think you should do it but you don't really want to do it—then that would create a situation of conflict and tension. So it is important at the beginning of any practice we do to really sit and think of our motivation. Why do we want to do this?

Then we can encourage the mind to realize what a helpful and joyful thing practice is—that this is not hurting the mind, that this is going to help the mind. And to convince the mind to be co-operative, because

if the mind co-operates and undertakes the practice with enthusiasm, that is already almost half the battle.

For example, if we are watching an interesting movie or reading an interesting book, we don't have to force the mind to concentrate. We are completely immersed in the drama or the book. The mind is already there. The problem is if somebody tries to take us away from the movie or the book. With no one standing there to tell us to concentrate, we are there. The mind is enjoying what it's doing, and we must bring that kind of quality to our practice.

We should undertake our practice with genuine enthusiasm, because we understand the benefits and the joys of a well-tamed mind, a mind which is no longer completely dominated by our negative emotions. We should be encouraged to practice to attain a mind which is much more free, much simpler and clearer. We are not a task master standing there with a whip, disciplining the mind to be good. We are not beating the mind, we are skilfully persuading the mind to undertake this practice for its own benefit and also to benefit all those others around us and eventually the whole world, because what we think affects everything. We should bring this kind of attitude into our practice.

Suppose for example that you are doing Anapanasati (breath concentration) or if you are doing a visualization on Chenrenzig. If you are visualising Chenren-

zig six times a day, day after day, week after week, it's like watching the same TV program. Can you imagine watching the same TV program six times a day, day after day, week after week? It would be torture!

But to my mind, that is the interesting thing about starting a retreat. Sometimes the first week you think, "God, it's so boring," and maybe the first week it is quite boring. But as you get into it and the practice itself begins to open up, it begins to reveal its own potential. And then the mind becomes very fascinated.

At one time I did a three-year retreat in which I did the same practice four times a day. And in the end, I was much more fascinated by the practice than when I began. Because if the mind knows what one is doing, it just begins to unfold like a little flower. As a bud gradually begins to unfold, you see its many levels of petals and finally it opens up to reveal its full beauty.

Every practice has this potential. When we first look at it, it is very interesting, like a bud. Within that bud is the potential of all these beautiful blossoms inside. But we have to be patient you can't just pull all those petals, right? That doesn't work. We have to quietly wait and every day give it the warmth and moisture of our attention. This repeated application will of itself eventually allow the bud to open. So that is why we have a retreat, because it gives us that time and space for things to unfold within.

Normally when we do our daily practice it is only a small part of the day. After that we have our everyday ordinary life, our families, our work and our social life. Although we may be disciplined, it is hard to maintain the practice in our everyday life. The power dissipates. It's like cooking food. It would be very hard to cook if you turned up the heat very high and then turned it off again, and then next day you come back and turned on the heat and then turned it off again. What you need is to have a constant heat that gives time for everything to cook.

That is what a retreat situation is all about, it's about being cooked. If you are in a very closed retreat situation where you don't see others and you are very intensively involved in the practice, it's like being in a pressure cooker, because none of the steam is going out. But because it is a pressure cooker, one has to be careful or the pressure cooker is going to explode. Maybe it is better to use a slow cooker. It will take longer but the food is also very delicious and doesn't burn.

Basically, that is what retreat is about. It's not something to be afraid of. The opportunity to practice, either with others or by oneself, is something to rejoice about. One should rejoice that one has made the good karma and causes and conditions to be able to have this opportunity to completely dedicate oneself towards the spiritual life.

Gently Training The Mind

In the Tibetan tradition, retreats are usually divided into four or sometimes six sessions. Generally the same practices are repeated in each session, with the first and the last ones sometimes having added elements. But basically, you are repeating the same practices over and over again. In a way it is like a musician learning an instrument. You have to practice again and again until you get it right. But you do it just for the joy of practicing, not for the joy of achieving. That is a great joy, just being able to sit and be present, and absorb oneself in the practice. That's enough.

When one is in retreat, especially sometimes if one is by oneself, one also has to take care of the mind not just during the time of formal practice but also in the intermediate times. It is important at that time not to allow the mind to go wherever it wants, like the saying that the body is in the cave and the mind is in the bazaar.

So you don't spend your time wandering around shopping plazas or in your favourite restaurant, or even with your family. There's time for all that later. This is not the time for the mind to just wander on its habitual path. This is very important. One's mind should stay where the body is. One should keep the mind focused here and now, on what is happening here and now.

For example, if one is doing a Chenrenzig practice, then a retreat is a perfect opportunity to really integrate one's practice into one's daily life—to see oneself as Chenrenzig, to see one's environment as the Potala Pureland and to hear all sounds as mantras. I see myself as Chenrenzig and all beings are Chenrenzig. Or all the males are Chenrenzig and all the females are Tara. But it's more difficult when you have to deal with people if you are not used to that practice. You become very artificial.

But if you are in the retreat not talking with people (because even if you are in a group, you are not speaking; everybody is very quiet and internalized), then there is a perfect opportunity to develop the sense of identity with the deity and to carry that into whatever activities one is doing. When one is eating, when one is walking, when one is looking at sky, when one is bathing or going to the bathroom or whatever.

Suppose we are practicing, for example, Vipassana or the concentration of the in-breath and the out-breath. We don't just throw that aside during the intervals between our formal practice—we carry that with us. If we are doing the meditation of breathing, then whatever other things we are doing, we can also be conscious of our breathing in and breathing out. We can be conscious of our body when it's moving—when we are sitting, or when we are standing or walking. It is the quality of integrating the practice with every

single thing we do, every thought we think—this is what we are trying to.

If we think that the practice is something which we do by just sitting on a cushion, then we do not understand what Dharma practice is. Dharma practice is to bring it into every area of our lives. There is no better way to learn how to do that than in the protective environment of a retreat.

The Retreat Environment

In the retreat you have space. You don't have to interact with people, so you have the opportunity to begin to learn how to bring about the quality of awareness into everything you do. It is a very protective environment. When one understands it, when one gets a taste of that, then one can go out and begin to learn how to integrate that into one's everyday life which of course is much more challenging. But it's very hard to create that internal environment if you have no basis for it, unless one has had that first taste.

Retreats can be very helpful because they give us the opportunity to get some genuine experience, so at least there is some basis which we can then begin to build on and integrate with our everyday experiences. Otherwise, if one is just doing one's everyday practice

in the morning, it's much harder to learn how to take that feeling into everyday life.

So I would recommend that everybody try to go for at least some group retreats of a week or ten days. This is very helpful. You then see that everyone around you has the same problems.

Everybody who meditates has problems, but they think they are the only one and that nobody else has any. They think that everybody else just sits down and goes into Samadhi, that only they have discovered that they have thoughts when they try to concentrate. And that they are the first people who ever had aching knees and aching backs. But when they are with a group then they discover that everybody has the same problems, everybody has the same difficulties. They have the same physical problems, the same mental problems. It's actually very encouraging.

With patience and perseverance, one can go beyond these initial obstacles. Let's say you want to be a musician. Nobody ever sat down at a piano and played a musical piece straight off. It's not possible. You start by putting your fingers on the keyboard and learning a few very simple exercises. Your fingers hit the wrong keys and you feel so completely clumsy, that this is impossible, but you keep going. If you have a good teacher, that teacher will encourage you. Then one day you suddenly discover that you can play simple little tunes, and then you keep going and you can play more compli-

cated things. Until in the end suddenly you can play a Sonata, why not? But not in one day, and not without tremendous patience and tremendous perseverance.

The mind has never been trained, we have always allowed the mind to be totally uncontrolled. It goes where it wants to go and we follow behind it. The problem is out there, the problem is our neighbour, our partner, our children, our teacher, the world, the government. It's not me, I'm OK! It's all about these other people. Why can't they be like me?

It's only when we really sit and confront the mind and say, "No, you have to stay here and forget all this other stuff," that we will realize the mind will never do that. Its going to think everything else except what we want it to think, because it's a wild horse, a drunken wild horse. Like a wild horse, it goes everywhere except where we want it to go. We normally don't realize the problems until we try to tame the mind. When we attempt to tame the mind and understand it, then we see what a critical situation we have.

But there is good news. Every mind can be tamed. If it's tame and under control, we become the master instead of being a slave to the mind and our emotions. That is really extremely liberating. We don't have to change the whole world, we don't have to change all the people outside of ourselves, we just have to change ourselves. Isn't that nice? I mean, it is exhausting to change the government!

So retreats help us to do this. They help us to see the situation and to really go to work on it. When else do we have the opportunity, the time and space to really concentrate while on dealing with the mind and becoming one with our practice?

Another problem with the practice is that if we only do it for a short period, there is the practice and there is the mind and they are sort of looking at each other. It's up in the head. Modern Singaporeans nowadays are probably like Westerners in that we think in our heads, and so we meditate in our heads. We are meditating in our heads with our conceptual minds and the conceptual mind is by definition dualistic. So therefore, there is the person who is meditating and there is the meditation. They are sort of facing each other. Here I am sitting looking at the breath coming in; I'm looking at the breath going out; and there is this person looking and there is the breath. They are separate.

So during a retreat, because one is continuing to carry on in this practice, (not only during the formal sitting period, but as much as possible during the break period too), at some point the division between the practitioner and the practice falls apart and one becomes the practice. When that happens, it is as if the practice moves from the head down into the heart. When the practitioner and the practice merge, you become the practice.

When that happens, there is naturally a transformation. The transformation does not take place in the head, it takes place in the heart. When the heart changes, then naturally the thinking which emanates from the heart will change too. But it's not merely changing the individual's intellectual patterns; you have to go much deeper. Our ordinary thinking mind is like a computer, but where is the energy driving the computer and who is programming it? It's not good enough just to change the superficial program, you have to change at a very deep level.

And retreat gives one an opportunity to be able to do that. It's as I said, on a slow cooker, giving time for the food to break down from its separate components and blend together. This is what retreats are for.

It gives us time. Otherwise when we sit down to do a meditation two hours a day, there are always thoughts like, "At seven o'clock I am going to have breakfast." There is a need to watch the time. Even if the meditation is deep, there are limits because you've got to go to work, you've got to take the children to school. But in the retreat situation, you have what seems like endless time in which you keep developing and opening up.

And if you have a skilful teacher in the retreat situation, then that can also be extremely helpful because s/he can give directions on how to help this process along. I think that is very clear.

Questions and Answers

Q. When I meditate, I have a sense of my body and a sense of my entire being disappearing into space. These experiences were very frightening. Since then I have been very worried about meditating again.

A. As I said, the problem with practicing on one's own is that these experiences can happen. They are infinite in variety and you don't know which one is going to happen. For different people different things will happen, and because they are far outside of our very safe experience, they are terrifying. This is why having a teacher can help.

Q. What was your experience in the isolated retreat?

A. On the whole, it was a very happy experience. Because as I said, I did have this sense of infinite time and space, that for me is the greatest joy. Once the first snow fell, usually in November, then one knew that one wasn't going to see anybody until May. It's not that I don't like people. People asked, "Why she is so happy when for six months she not going to see anybody?"

But it meant that one had that tremendous time to really absorb oneself into the practice which to me was very liberating, just there alone. It gave my whole mind

the sense of great spaciousness. I stayed there because I couldn't think of any nicer place to be and because it's a very safe environment. It's very quiet and isolated.

During practice, of course there are times when one gets extremely blissful and there are other times of extreme agitation when the practice seems boring and you would rather be doing anything else rather than sitting there having to do it. This is natural, it's the nature of the mind. Sometimes one is going to be up, and sometimes one is going to be down. The point of these retreats is that, up or down, you just do it. It's just the waves of the mind. Sometimes a wave goes up and everything is wonderful and you are rushing forward and then you go down into a trough and everything is grey and dark and boring and you can think of a thousand things you would rather be doing, but it doesn't matter. You are going to do it. There is no question.

You get up at three in the morning and you sit. You don't ask yourself whether you want to get up or when you are getting up. You never ask that, you just get up. That is another good thing about retreat. When one gets into a routine, every day is very like the next day which would be like the day before or the day after. You know, for years you just have the same day. So after I had done the three year retreat, it was like I had done three months. I couldn't believe that three years had gone by.

Even now as I look back, those three years were really like three months because time has no meaning. Three months or thirty years doesn't have any meaning. It is more or less the same day. Time is irrelevant and it just flows. Sometimes you feel wonderful and sometimes you feel horrible. It's irrelevant. It's just a play of the mind. The practice is just the moment. You just carry on day after day.

Q. When you are doing retreats and you structure your day, how do you know, for example, when you have done your three hour session?

A. I didn't count, actually. But that is because in the Tibetan practice, every session is very structured. There are certain things which have to be recited, there are a certain number of mantras which have to be said and practices which have to be done. After a while, you more or less know the time that's going to take, three hours or less. But usually you get into your optimum speed, you know, not too fast and not too slow. That usually is the same one day after the other, so you don't need to look at the clock, but more or less every day you will finish around the same time like that.

Traditionally, people doing a Vipassana or Anapanasati retreat used incense sticks. You would decide how long will be comfortable for you to sit and find a piece of incense which will burn that long.

It's also important in a retreat, as I've said in the beginning, to learn the balance in one's practice between being too slack—too easy on oneself so that nothing is cooked—or putting up the flame too high so it all gets scorched and burnt. This is not only my opinion but one that is also found in books. One should do a practice until you get to the point where you are just only on the edge of having done enough. But it isn't yet to the point where the mind strays. Stop there, because the mind will then remember that it was a nice thing to do, that one was enjoying it. And if the mind carries that imprint of pleasure, then next time it will be happy to do it again. If we push it too hard, than the imprints will be of strain, stress and distress. And then if we want to practice, the mind will become resistant.

So as I said before, it is very important to learn to work with the mind and get it to co-operate. If the mind is co-operating then that's already half the battle. And also with one session, one should structure oneself—not pushing too hard but giving a little bit of a push. But at the same time, not so much of a push that we over exert ourselves. It is not easy.

Q. What is a meditation box? Please describe it and why you chose to stay so long in it.

A. Well, that's practical. A meditation box is just a box with a back; my meditation box was 36 inches by 30 inches. It raised me above the ground, because there were often floods. It had sides about nine inches to a foot in depth. In Singapore it won't work—your legs will get too hot. But in a cold climate it's very good, because you don't get the drafts. There was a padded cloth on which I sat—it doesn't fall anywhere, it's very contained. It's your own little world.

One sleeps in it. Normally when we sleep lying down, it's very hard at the time of falling asleep for the mind not to be dispersed. And then we fall into a very unfocused sleep. But if you sleep sitting up, there are Tibetan methods for sleep called dream yogas and sleep-yogas. At that moment when you are just falling asleep, meditation reproduces on a minimal scale the subtle dissolution of the consciousness at the time of the death. In order to make use of this very subtle dissolution of the consciousness at the time of the death, we must be able to recognize it. And one of the primary ways of recognizing it is to learn how to recognize it at the time of sleep.

So therefore, if you are sitting up to sleep, your awareness stays very centred and doesn't disperse so easily. Then you sleep very deeply but not very long—for two or three hours at most. When you awake, you are already sitting up. Your awareness is

like a thread, it runs all the way through, and this is much easier when you are sitting. And that's why people, especially in a retreat situation, usually choose to sit up.

Q. I am a cowardly deity practitioner who doesn't want to declare himself.

A. When one is in retreat doing a deity practice, it is essential to carry what you call the pride of the deity which in one sense is that one really is Kwan Yin, one really is Chenrenzig. One doesn't understand it, but actually really who else could we be? It's our Buddha nature. In the last lifetime we were Mr. Smith, next time who knows what we will be? Those are temporary identifications, but the reality is our Buddha nature, which is manifesting one as Chenrenzig or Kwan Yin, and carrying that sense of essential Buddha nature into our everyday practice. This is very essential for deity yoga. If we don't have that, it's not going to work. It's going to be an intellectual game of visualizing. It has to be here, this absolute conviction that this is the reality of the situation. That's what I'm trying to say.

Q. Does it mean avoiding everything?

A. Is letting go the same as avoiding? The whole question of letting go is that we don't cling. It doesn't mean

we cannot have or enjoy objects. It's a very important point. There is a story about this king in ancient India. He had a big palace, many beautiful wives, jewels and gold, everything he could possibly want. He had a Guru who was a yogi and very ascetic; all he had was one possession, a begging bowl. One time they were sitting in the palace grounds under a tree, and the Guru was giving teachings to the king. A servant came running out calling, "Your Majesty, Your Majesty, the whole palace is on fire! It's being completely consumed by flames, come immediately!" And the king said, "Don't bother me, I'm here with the Guru learning Dharma, you go and deal with it." But the Guru jumped up saying, "What do you mean? I left my bowl in the palace!"

OK, you got that. It doesn't matter what we have, its how we relate to it. Having or not having is not the point, objects are innocent. The problem is not the objects, the problem is our attachment or non-attachment to the objects.

Q. I'm suffering from a spiritual see-saw. Certain days I'm dedicated to my practice and I feel very good, and then on days following this I feel very down and unmotivated. I try hard to motivate and discipline myself to overcome this resistance. How do I conquer this problem?

A. This is a common thing. Nobody, including the great saints, were ever or always on an eternal high. Usually great highs are followed by deep lows.

The good practitioner just keeps going. The good practitioner doesn't get too high when it's high, and doesn't get too low when it's low. S/he realizes that this is the nature of Samsara, originating from Samsara. Waves go up and waves come down.

These are just clouds in the nature of the sky-like mind. And a good practitioner just goes on. There are going to be ups and downs, there are going to be beautiful meadows and deserts. We just carry on walking. Don't get too attached to the beautiful meadows and the streams, don't be disheartened by the deserts. Just keep going, that's all you can do.

Sometimes when you are doing meditation, you might feel, What a waste of time, this is really stupid, what am I doing all this for? But you do it. Another time it's absolutely wonderful, wow, really, I almost got enlightened!. Just do it, forget all that. Leave it. It's part of letting go. We let go not only of the good things but the bad things, we just hold everything light, let everything keep flowing. Everything is change, I mean it is impermanent. This was one of the essential teachings of the Buddha. So of course the mind, which is like this all the time, is going to change.

Why are we only attached to the high points in life? Why do we feel aversion to the low points? They are all the display of the mind, we cannot understand our mind if we only want the good parts and we would never be a genuine practitioner if we could only practice when we felt good. Everybody goes through that. I'll bet there's not a single person in this whole room who doesn't have this problem.

Everybody has this problem, even Milarepa and the great saints. It is just part of the mind. That is irrelevant, that is the point, so we just keep going. Step after step after step that's enough. And come what may, good times, bad times, rainy weather, sunny weather, it doesn't matter. Just let the weather pass. If we are always downcast when the weather is rainy and really happy when it's sunny, we are going to be miserable, right? You know sometimes it rains, sometimes the sun shines, but we go to work just the same.

Q. In the deity practice, one has to develop divine pride. What is the development of divine pride and can increasing our pride be an obstacle to our practice?

A. It shouldn't be, because not only our own mind is Chenrenzig, so is everybody else. I mean one half of the deity practice is to get the sense of identification with the deity, but the other part is to see all beings as Chenrenzig; all beings are Tara.

It's not just me in the middle of my mandala. One is seeing the Buddha's potential in every single being, every being, not just human beings. Insects, animals—they all have the potential for enlightenment. It may be dormant, but it's there. We all have this in common.

It's not my Buddha nature versus your Buddha nature. Buddha nature is indivisible, it's like the sky. It is not that this is my little bit of sky and that's your little bit of sky; you keep your little bit of sky up and I keep mine below. Sky is just sky. We can divide the land but not space. Sky is just sky.

If you are really doing it with understanding, then Buddha nature is also empty. It's not a thing, it's not something sitting inside you like a divine core. It's something infinite and vast like the sky, so how can you be proud of the sky?

Q. Could you explain what you mean by Buddhist practice? Does this mean prayers or meditation? Does it mean one has to chant prayers in Buddhist lingo?

A. What I'm talking about here is the practice, by which I mean meditation, formal meditation, chanting and the yogas or whatever you happen to be doing. Of course in general, Buddhist practice includes every moment. How we relate to others, developing loving-kindness, patience, generosity, ethical conduct, just how

we relate to those around us, to our families, to our colleagues and how we relate to situations in life when they come to us. Natural responses, whether they are skilful or unskilful, are all Buddhist practice. But here at this time we are talking about retreats. So yes, when I talk about Buddhist practice I am talking about formal meditation.

What is Buddhist lingo? In Theravadin countries such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, all the chantings are done in Pali. In the Mahayana schools when Buddhism spread to China and Tibet and so on, then the first thing they did was to translate the books and chanting into their own languages so that they could understand what was being said.

The sacred language in Buddhism is probably Sanskrit, although the Buddha did not speak Sanskrit. The actual language which the Buddha spoke is no longer used. Even Pali is not the language of the Buddha, it's a West Indian dialect. So there is no language presently extant which the Buddha himself actually spoke. The Mahayana use Sanskrit, but nowadays there are no people practicing in Sanskrit any more.

Usually, people prefer to chant in their own language, Chinese or Tibetan, which are easier to chant in than English. English is extremely difficult to chant. This is still one of the big issues which people are wrestling with—whether to chant nicely together in a language not understood or to chant in one's own language

which is not so euphonious. Personally I'm waiting for the Bodhisattva Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, to integrate both and so solve the problem for us.

Q. Can you share with us what motivated you to do what you did and are doing, especially the cave experience? Was it difficult to come back to society?

A. The retreat was a vocation for me, I mean it was what I knew I had to do. This was what I was called to do in this lifetime for whatever reasons. Of course, from a Buddhist point of view, that was just my karma.

Obviously something I left unfinished in a past life. Something I needed to continue in this lifetime. I was very motivated by the discovery that here was a practice which was so perfect, and the teachers who were so enlightened and the Dharma which is so unexcelled. I wanted to give it my whole being and I didn't want to be distracted. I knew how easily I can be distracted! For me it made sense to try to be in a situation which was non-distracting so that I could give myself to the practice completely and absolutely. So that was what I did.

I felt that if I was eventually going to be of any benefit to anybody, I could only do that by really realizing the Dharma in my heart. When I myself was in a state of ignorance and confusion, how could I help others?

And it seemed for me that the perfect way to do that was to be in isolation.

Of course, all my Lamas always encouraged this. My Lama not only sent me to Lahoul in the first place, but always said to me, "For you, it is better to be alone." This is because he knows I'm a chameleon and I take on the colouring of whomever I'm with, so this is very dangerous. To me isolation was a way to come to terms with who and what we really are when we are not playing roles. Normally we are continually playing many roles in our lives. When you are alone for an extended period of time, it's very boring playing roles for yourself, so you begin to drop it. Retreat gives us this time and space in which we do it quite organically, not in a harsh way.

And I liked being up in the cave; I had a good time. People think I did it to rival Milarepa, but it was nothing like that. I was very joyful, I loved to be in there. I couldn't think of anywhere else I would rather be, anything else I would rather be doing. So that's why I lived there.

As for my family, on the whole most of them didn't have any say one way or the other. My father had died when I was two. I had one brother, but he was abroad. There was only my mother who had any impact on me, and she became a Buddhist about six months after I become a Buddhist in England. Then she spent a year with me in India with my teacher. She took refuge with

my lama and was devoted to Tara, so she was very supportive. For many years she even sent money to support me there, which was extremely hard for her.

When we talk about unconditional love I think of my mother because my brother was in Saudi Arabia, I was in India, and there she was all alone. But she never said, "Why don't you come home and take care of your old mother?" You know, she never used psychological blackmail even when she was really sick and nearly dead. I didn't even know. She didn't write to me because she didn't want my practice to be disturbed. She thought that either she would recover, in which case why bother me, or else she would die, in which case why bother me? I only learned she was ill from a friend of hers who wrote me an indignant letter, "Your mother is dying, why don't you come home?" I didn't know anything, my mother didn't tell me. She really understood.

In fact, she told some friends of mine that she always prayed that in her next rebirth she would come back again as my mother because she was afraid that otherwise I would have parents who didn't understand that I needed to lead a special sort of life. That's love. She died about fifteen years ago while I was in retreat. People mistake love as attachment, but real love is thinking of others, not yourself. My mother to me is a shining example of unconditional love.

When I first came out of retreat, I went to Italy. It was wonderful. Again there in Italy my friends were all on spiritual paths—Hindu paths, Christian paths or Buddhist paths. Very nice people. After that came this question of starting a nunnery and going around the world talking. Again I always met with very lovely people. Where are all these horrible people we hear about? I don't meet them. I only meet nice people, so it's been a very painless transition. And meeting with many people has also given me the opportunity to develop qualities which you can't do in isolation. So it's been fine.

The Second Teaching

Mahamudra Practice

The subject we're talking about this evening is something called Mahamudra, so I should explain first of all what this means for those of you who may not know.

This is a Sanskrit word. Maha means great and mudra has several meanings. It can mean a gesture. For example those of you who know any Sanskrit will know that the gesture the Maitreya Buddha is making is called the dharmachakra mudra. Mudra means a gesture, but it also means a 'seal'. And the Tibetans translated it as chag gya. Chag means hand and again gya means a seal, but it can also mean a gesture. So in Tibetan they could play the same game the Sanskrit play, being ambiguous. But in English we don't have a word which means both a seal and gesture. For this reason, because we don't really have a good equivalent, mostly we just say Mahamudra.

This system was introduced primarily into Tibet during the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries when a whole renaissance was taking place in Tibet. Many Tibetan scholars and practitioners were going to India seeking masters and bringing the teachings back into Tibet and starting new lineages, new traditions. Of the many traditions which were started at that time, only a few

are still existent today. But one of them which traces its lineage back to the Indian masters Tilopa and Naropa is called the Kagyu.

Now the Kagyu is mostly known outside of Tibet because of Milarepa. This great Tibetan yogi of the 11th century extemporaneously sang many songs and these have been translated into English and, I think, Chinese. Many people know about the Kagyu lineage and about Mahamudra, through his songs and his teachings.

The lineage was brought from India in the 11th century. It was taught to someone called Marpa the translator, who was the direct master of Milarepa. And Marpa's teacher was called Naropa.

Naropa had been one of the chancellors at the great university of Nalanda in India. Then he had given up all his titles and honours and, in a way, his respectability as a monk and a professor at this great university. He went looking for a teacher who would convey to him the real essence of the practice.

The story goes that at one time Naropa was a very great pundit, a great scholar. He was sitting one evening reading his commentaries on the sutras and a shadow fell over the books. When he looked up he saw a very ugly old woman standing there. She said to him, "Do you understand the words you are reading?" And he said, "Yes, of course I understand the words." He was a professor, right? And she said, "Well, do

you understand the meaning?" And he thought, "She looked so pleased when I said I understood the words; naturally I'm a professor, you know, so of course I understand the meaning."

He said, "Yes, I understand the meaning." The old woman began to cry. Naropa said, "What's the problem?" and she replied, "When you said you understood the words, that's true. When you said you understood the meaning, that's not true." So he said, "Well then, who understands the meaning?" "My brother, Tilopa," she replied.

And Naropa had the humility to understand that she was right, that he had never experienced the meaning of the texts which he intellectually understood very well. So he gave everything up and went to Bengal seeking this Tilopa, who he eventually found living like a beggar by the side of the river and throwing live fish into a hot pan and eating them. Which you know, to a Brahmin, a very respectable college professor and Buddhist monk, must have been hard to take. Who throws live fish into a hot pan? And so that was the first challenge, to believe that this dirty old beggar eating fish by the river was actually going to be his guru.

How would you have come to terms with that? Because we discriminate, we have ideas about what a perfect guru should be like. We have our own ideas about what a teacher is, how they are going to conduct themselves, how they're going to be. And if they don't

come up to our pre-conceived ideas, then we will reject them, right? But if Naropa had rejected Tilopa at that point, there would be no Kagyu lineage today and I wouldn't be here giving you this talk on Mahamudra.

So what is Mahamudra? Basically it's a form of meditation which is simply learning how to observe the mind. As with all these meditations on the mind itself, they are so excessively easy to talk about that people think it cannot be this simple. We always imagine that a practice must be extremely complex and difficult—otherwise, how can it work? But in actual fact, the essential practice is very simple.

Tilopa said to Naropa, Naropa said to Marpa, Marpa said to Milarepa, Milerepa said to Gampopa, and Gampopa said to everybody, just observe the mind without distraction. Now, if you think about it, that's the one thing we very rarely do. How often during the day do we actually observe the mind?

We are so fascinated by the input from our senses, and our senses here include the sixth sense of the mind with its thoughts, memories, conceptions and emotions. We are so caught up in what we see, what we hear, what we taste, what we think, what we feel—but we never observe. Very rarely do we stand back and question the knower, because we're so fascinated by the known.

If we look at the mind, it automatically will split into two. There is the observed and then there is the observer.

Now normally we are so fascinated by the observed that we don't turn the spotlight round and look at who is observing. We're not even conscious of that.

In the moment that we are conscious of being conscious, it's as if there's a light turned on in our minds. But in that moment of being conscious of consciousness, again the problem is that we begin to think, "Oh right, now I'm aware, now I'm really aware, now this is really awareness." And we've lost it. Again we are thinking about being aware, so we are no longer actually aware. Because genuine awareness is non-conceptual, it's not thinking. It's that consciousness prior to thinking, do you understand?

The Essence of the Practice

You see, this is the essence of the practice. That's why I'm talking about it first. If you don't get this bit you won't get anything else. It's that level of consciousness which is always above and behind all of our thinking and feeling. Without it, we would not be conscious. It is consciousness itself.

Normally when we think, we are totally immersed in our thinking. When we have emotions, we are totally immersed in our emotions. This is 'me'. Right? When we have memories, when we have thoughts, we are totally immersed in our memories. These are 'my' memories, this is who I am, this is what happened to

me. This is what I think, this is how I feel we completely identify with that. Do you understand?

When we are angry, when we are excited, when we are depressed, when we are elated, we are completely submerged in and identified with those thoughts and feelings. This is why we suffer. We suffer because we are completely identified with our thoughts and feelings and we think this is me. This is who I am. And because we are completely submerged in our emotions and our thoughts and our ideas, because we believe in them so much, they become very solid, very opaque.

And so if they're sad thoughts, sad memories, sad feelings, then we think, "I am a sad person". If they are happy thoughts, happy memories, happy feelings then we think, "I am a happy person". So we go up and down like a bottle slapped around on the ocean. Sometimes we're up, and sometimes we're down. Because it's the nature of the mind that the thoughts are like waves and waves go up and then they crash back down again, and then another lot come up and another lot go down.

Because we have no control, because we are so completely swept away by our feelings and our thoughts and our memories and we're so completely immersed in them, therefore we suffer.

Now it's not a matter of having no thoughts, no feelings, no emotions, no memories. The thoughts, the feelings and the memories are not the problem. The prob-

lem is that we identify with them and we believe in them and so we are controlled by them.

There is a T-shirt from Malaysia showing big waves. On the surface of the waves there's a surfboard, and on the surfboard there's a figure sitting in meditation, smiling. The logo says, "Riding the waves of life, be mindful, be happy". Now that is actually a very profound little T-shirt. Because the point is not that there are no waves. That surfboard is not riding on a still lake. There can be waves.

It's the nature of the mind to produce thoughts and emotions. What we need is the surfboard so that we can ride on these waves and have a good time. I mean, if you are a skilled surfer, you don't want a calm lake. The bigger the waves the more fun, right? But only for a skilful surfer. An unskilful surfer will just go sploosh straight back into the water again, and that's mostly what we do. We cannot ride the waves of our emotions and our thoughts and therefore we are submerged again and again.

For this reason, we have to practice first on a calm lake. The surfboard is this quality of awareness, of knowing when we are standing back and observing the thoughts and the emotions as just thoughts and emotions instead of 'my' thoughts, 'my' emotions. Just as mental states which like the waves rise up, stay a little bit and go down. When we have that quality of detached observance which is non-judgmental and

non-conceptual, then whatever happens in the mind is just part of the display.

The Four Yogas

In the Mahamudra system, there are four levels which are called the four yogas. The first one is called 'one pointedness'. The second one is called 'non-elaboration' or 'simplicity'. The third one is called 'one taste' and the fourth one is called 'beyond meditation' or 'no meditation'. I will explain these.

The first one, 'one pointedness', is identical to what in other systems is called shamatha, or peaceful abiding. The second, which is called 'non-elaboration' or 'simplicity', corresponds to what is called vipasyana.

Traditionally it is considered that the mind is like a lake. Imagine a lake up in the mountains, surrounded by snow mountains all around. Now there are winds blowing across the lake, so the surface of the lake is very disturbed by many waves and ripples. Because the lake is disturbed by these outer winds, the mud from the bottom of the lake is churned up, so as we look into the lake, the reflection appearing in the lake is very distorted. We can't see very far into the lake because of all the mud and disturbance on the surface.

This is like our minds. Normally our minds are very churned up, very disturbed by the input coming

from the senses, by what we see, what we hear, what we smell, what we touch and taste, by the thoughts and emotions in our mind. This disturbs the mind the whole time. So the surface of the mind is very churned up with thoughts and chatter and emotions and memories. Chatter, chatter, chatter... Our commentaries to ourselves the whole time.

Now, because the surface of our minds is so busy and churned up, we cannot reflect accurately on what is happening around us. Right? We only have our own interpretation. Everybody has had this experience. If something happens and five different people tell you about that event separately, it's like they are describing five different things because each one sees it completely from their own subjective experience. They don't really see what is happening. They just see their own interpretation of what is happening. We live our whole life like this, each one convinced that we have the true story and everybody else completely has misinterpreted it. Right?

Because the surface of the mind is so churned up, when we try to look into the mind, we don't get very far. There is too much external noise going on.

So then the waves are calm, the winds die down, the surface of the lake becomes calm, it becomes like a mirror. Many of you must have seen those photos of mountain lakes surrounded by snow mountains and when you look at it, it is difficult to know what is the

surface of the lake and what is the actual mountains. Because the lake mirrors the external so accurately, it's hard to know which is the reflection and which is the actual mountain.

When the surface of the lake is calm, then all the mud settles down to the bottom and as we look into the lake, we can see the stones, the weeds at the bottom, the fishes—we can see whatever is in the lake very clearly right down to the bottom.

Likewise with the mind, when it is completely calm, then first of all it reflects very accurately what is actually going on around it, because it's no longer interpreting. It's just seeing things as they really are, without all our projections and distortions which we quite unconsciously project onto everything. So first of all, we accurately see things.

But, of course, in the lake, the mud is still there, the rubbish is still there, the weeds are still there. Because the lake is now clear, we can see them more clearly, but they are still there. This was the Buddha's great discovery.

When the Buddha started training, he did very profound meditation practices under various teachers and he attained extremely rare levels of mental refinement which his teachers said were liberation. But he realized, no, this is not liberation, this is still within the realm of birth and death, this is still samsara. However refined the consciousness becomes, it's still within conceptual consciousness, it has not gone to the uncondi-

tioned. And that's why he started again looking into the mind itself. It's not enough just to still the mind, we have to look into the mind and examine it.

The first step is to look at the mind. Now in order to be able to look into the mind, it helps for the mind to be a little quietened down. So meditations on the in-breath and the out-breath are a good way to get the mind a little more calm, a little more manageable. Then, when the mind is a little more stable, we turn the attention to the thoughts themselves. First of all we do this just in order to get the mind to quieten down a little bit. This is the first stage, this one-pointedness.

There are two main ways in the Mahamudra for getting the mind to quieten down. The first one is that every time a thought comes, you very quickly chop it off, you stop it and you don't follow it. You just go... boom! Then another thought comes.... Boom! And then another thought... boom! If one does that very determinedly, after a while the mind begins to get exhausted and so it calms down. But this will also leave the mind quite tense, because you have to be very vigilant. And so to counteract the mind becoming too stressed, Singaporeans shouldn't do this one too much, this stopping thing — you already have enough problems!

The other one is just to let the mind flow. And this is the one which nowadays is mainly taught. But sometimes lamas think that it's good to alternate the two,

because when letting the mind flow, sometimes you get a bit too drowsy and relaxed. To let the mind just flow, observe it, but don't get caught up.

You see, what happens normally when we look at the mind is that we stand back. It's said to be like a man sitting on the banks of a river watching the waters flow by. That's the attitude. Normally what happens is for a few minutes maybe we can do that, then suddenly we think up a really interesting thought without even intending it. Next thing we know we are completely caught up in some memory, or some idea which we've suddenly caught hold of or some anticipation for what we're going to do when this session is finished, and we're not even conscious of it. And then suddenly we realize we have been swept away by the river, we're not on the bank any more.

So they say the instruction is not to think of the past, not to anticipate the future and not to hold onto the present. Just to know. Just to know what is happening in the mind at this moment, without any judgement, without any analysis, without any manufacturing of thoughts — good thoughts, bad thoughts, happy thoughts, sad thoughts. They're just thoughts, do you see? It's just a mental state which lasts for a moment and then changes, it's not 'me', it's not 'mine'.

And so we just sit and observe the flow of the thinking, without becoming fascinated, without creating thoughts, without thinking, "Oh, that's a pretty

good thought, that's really clever!" Or "God, how can I think this, I'm really a horrible person!". Forget all that! If we start to judge our thoughts, just realize that the judgement itself is just another thought, and let it go.

The essence of a good meditator is to have a mind which is totally relaxed and at the same time totally alert. It's very important not to get into a state of feeling very calm, very blissful and totally fogged out. You know, you can stay in that state for a long time and sometimes people think it's a state of samadhi, a state of deep concentration. But it's what in Tibetan is called 'sinking' and it is just a manifestation of the sleepy mind.

To know when one is really on the right track, the mind should be extremely relaxed, extremely spacious but absolutely poised, absolutely awake and vivid, the awareness should be very clear, as if for the first time you have woken up. Then, in that state, you're OK. But if you find you're just very peaceful, very blissed out, everything sort of foggy, then, that's very wrong and you should wake yourself out of that as quickly as possible.

The other extreme is to find yourself trying to be perfect, trying to see every thought, trying to be an achiever and then you just get extremely tense. So, be relaxed but very clear.

In Lahoul, the Himalayan valley where I lived, sometimes in the summer the shepherd would come up with his sheep and wander by or settle out in the meadow below the cave. At one time perhaps the shep-

herd was sick or he had something else to do. Anyway, a boy came up with the sheep, instead of the usual shepherd. And this quite young boy had obviously never done this before and he was very nervous. He probably thought if he lost a single sheep, he'd be walloped. So he was very careful not to lose any sheep.

He was in the meadow below my cave and I was watching him. And all day long, he kept the sheep very close together, and drove them here, then he drove them there, then he drove them there, then he drove them here, the whole day. So by the end of the day, the sheep were extremely nervous, they hadn't had anything to eat and they were exhausted. And the poor shepherd was also exhausted, because he spent the whole day driving them around and making sure that they didn't escape. And then they went down the hill, all of them extremely tired out from a very wearying day.

The next day, the old shepherd came back. He put the sheep in the same meadow and then he climbed to a little hillock that overlooked it. He had a bottle of beer and he just lay in the sun with his beer. The sheep scattered around and grazed and he kept his eye on them. At the end of the day, he rounded them up and took them back.

And that is a perfect example of how to and how not to look at the mind. The first method is the fear of losing a single thought, got to be careful of what

I'm thinking, got to be perfect, got to do this right, got to be a really good meditator... and so you just end up exhausted. You see this with meditators sometimes. They get very uptight. Buddhahood or bust!

But the skilful meditator is like the skilful shepherd. He just observes. The shepherd didn't go to sleep; he didn't go away. He was looking at those sheep. But he left the sheep to do their own thing and after a while, the sheep grazed and then they laid down. What else are sheep to do?

It is the same thing with the thoughts. If we just quietly stand back and observe the thoughts, then after a while the thoughts get a bit embarrassed. Because thoughts are used to us being completely with them and believing in them and identifying with them, so they can elaborate themselves and create these whole fantasy worlds in which we live. But if you're standing back and just looking, and seeing a thought as just a thought, they stand exposed.

Silly thoughts reveal themselves as being very silly thoughts. When we look at repetitive thoughts that we have had many times, suddenly we think "Oh god, I've done this one before, this is so boring". They cease to be so entertaining any more. Then, like staring at somebody to expose them, they become shy and just sort of sit down. We don't have to do anything. We don't have to force the mind to be still. If we are really observing the mind quietly, the mind of itself will

begin to get slower and slower. We don't have to do anything.

It is said that at the beginning, the mind is like a turbulent waterfall, rushing endlessly, then it becomes like a river in full spate, just moving but very sedately and eventually it enters into the ocean of samadhi. So as we are looking at the mind, not being involved in it, just seeing the thoughts as thoughts, just looking, the thoughts of themselves eventually will begin to just naturally slow down.

Now, as our awareness becomes more keen, more precise, the thoughts will become less opaque, less solid, more transparent. Thoughts are like a chain. And if we are very conscious, the thoughts will at some point create a gap and because we are very aware, we can see between the gap. And between the gap is actually the same quality of awareness as that which is aware. So at that point, there is this non-dual awareness which will manifest.

I will give an example. All examples are material and should not be grasped at. They are approximations just to give you an idea; you mustn't push them too hard.

You've all been to the cinema. We sit there and we watch this movie taking place in front of us. We have the hero, the heroine, and the villain. There's the girl—he gets her, then he loses her, but then in the end

he gets her again and it's all right. If he doesn't get her then it's a tragedy and we will cry.

We are totally caught up in this movie. Nobody thinks to turn around and look at the projector. Now, if you think about it, what is actually happening is that there are these separate transparent frames which are moving so fast, with light from behind streaming through them and a blank screen in front, creating the illusion of movement and reality. And we are all very fascinated, right?

And this is like the mind, exactly. It's exactly like that. There are these frames of mind moments, of energy impulses in our minds which seem so real, but actually are transparent. Because the light of our unconditioned awareness streams through them, we project out. And as long as we are looking outwards at this projection in front of us, or even just as far as the thoughts and emotions which are part of this projection, we are caught up in the plot and so we suffer, because we believe in it.

But if instead of that, we allow the film to start running more and more slowly, then we begin to see that actually they are in fact just separate frames. Then we can see that the screen in front on which they are displayed is a reflection of the light which is streaming out from behind. So our attention then is not with the separate frames but with this light which is creating the reality which we all cling to.

Sometimes we have a momentary glimpse of what is called the nature of the mind or the Buddha nature. This is not really spatial at all, but for the sake of speaking, one could say that it is behind the coming and going of the thoughts, using the same illustration as the projector or the camera. When one has a momentary glimpse of that, then it's as if the whole facade falls apart, at least for a moment. It's as if for one moment, one wakes up and realizes one has been dreaming the whole time. It's just a cinema show. Now, we can still enjoy the cinema show. There's nothing wrong with enjoying. Even though you know it's just a movie you can still enjoy it, but you don't believe it's real any more. So therefore you can have a little weep or a little laugh, but it's not a traumatic experience, because you know it's not real.

After that first glimpse of the nature of the mind, the gap between the thinking process, then one moves to the next level which is called 'non-elaboration' or 'simplicity'. That is vipasyana. In vipasyana, you are asking, "What is a thought?" You have the stream of the thought, you have the movement of the mind, and then you have times when the mind is completely still, with no thoughts.

Then you have this knower that knows the movement, that knows the stillness. Are these the same or are they different? Is the knower separate from the known or another aspect of the known? Is the mind

essentially different when it's moving from when it's silent?

What is a thought? We say, "I think". We are ruled by our thoughts, but what is a thought? Where does it come from? Where does it stay? Where does it go? What does it look like? What is an emotion? I'm angry, I'm depressed, I'm happy. But where is this depression, where is this sadness, where is this joy, what does it look like? What does it feel like? And who is happy, who is sad? We say "I, I, I..." — who is this "I"? So we start to question. We don't take anything for granted any more. We look into the mind itself with a big question mark. What is a thought, and where is the thinker, who is the thinker?

Meditation isn't just about sitting and feeling blissed out. Meditation is really trying to get to the very root of our being and experiencing it. Sometimes people have a very powerful experience of the nature of the mind, or their essential Buddha nature, which again to change the simile, could be likened to the sky.

The sky is vast and infinite in all directions. Space, where is space not? And thoughts and emotions are like the clouds in the sky, right? Sometimes they are white fluffy clouds, sometimes they are big black clouds. But whatever the clouds may be, they do not essentially change in any way the nature of the sky. However black the clouds, the sky is not sullied. However white and pretty the clouds, the sky is not beauti-

fied. The sky is always there, and in fact, where is the sky not? Because it's here too. We think of the sky as something up there, but where does it stop? It's here, right? Where is space not? It's inside us also, its everywhere.

And so when we think of the nature of the mind, sometimes we think of it as something very remote, which only very high Bodhisattvas and Buddhas can realize. We think it is something very high and special, but it's not like that. Every single moment if we are conscious we're there. It's so close we don't see it. Because we always think it's something fantastic and wonderful and out there somewhere. That we have to spend years and years practising in order to be able to realize it, to be able to recognize it.

But actually in one moment, we are always in that state. We don't recognize it. This is our problem. This is why we have to do all this purification, and all this gaining merit and all this sitting practice. It's just to bring us to the point we have never actually left. Because as long as you can hear or see or think, that is awareness. Who knows that you are thinking?

That awareness is always with us but we don't recognize it. We don't have to attain it, we just have to recognize it. So all this sitting, all this analysis is very important only because it brings us back to where we have actually never left, to who we are.

One taste means that when one is completely habitualized to being in this state of non-conceptual awareness, then one integrates it more and more into one's life. When one's happy, when one's sad, whatever circumstances of life one sees into their essential empty nature.

"One sees" that it's all just the play of the mind, and then whatever happens, one is inwardly undisturbed. Because one sees it's just a dream. In a dream if we recognize we are dreaming, then whether they are bad dreams or good dreams it doesn't matter, because we know it's just a dream. As long as we do not know we are dreaming, then we are caught up in that dream. We suffer terribly if it's a bad dream and we experience all the emotions. When we wake up, we realize that it was just a dream. As long as we are dreaming, then we are completely involved in that dream. So in the state of one taste one understands continually this is just a dream and therefore one can play within the events of one's life, but one isn't caught up with them.

Sometimes people have the idea that very realized beings will be completely blank and emotionless and sort of cold because they are so detached and that they see the inherent emptiness of everything, so therefore they don't react. But I think any of us who has met a genuinely realized being will see that, on the contrary, they're the most alive people we have ever met. Many great lamas and other teachers who have

done much practice are completely awake and therefore they are more vivid in their personalities, more clear, more ready to laugh or to cry, even more than ordinary beings. But the emotion isn't sticky.

Somebody had this vision of us all as beings covered with little barbs, little hooks. We are swirling around and so everything which we touch with our senses sticks to us. Because we are covered with little barbs, everything catches on to us. So what we need to do is to withdraw these barbs. Then everything we touch just slides off us, right? It's not that we don't need to touch, it's that when we touch, we don't stick. The problem is not the touching, the problem is the sticking and most of us are stuck, we are attached. Actually that's the meaning of 'attached' — to be stuck.

Our minds are extremely unfree. And so these kinds of meditations are a way to get us to that level of freedom, a freedom of the mind. We need to have that open, spacious mind. Our minds are not spacious now, they are totally crowded.

The fourth level is called 'non-meditation' because at that point, one no longer needs to make any kind of effort to be aware. The mind has so completely merged into this level of non-conceptual awareness that it just naturally flows. It's a natural inherent aspect of the mind. One no longer needs to practice.

The important levels for us to concentrate on are the first two, which is first to get the mind very quiet

and calm, and learn how to observe the thoughts. Then when the mind has moments of great lucidity and stillness, turn the attention onto the thoughts themselves and start to bring back thinking, in the sense of this probing, this investigation, this curiosity about the mind itself.

Traditionally, Mahamudra is only undertaken after people have completed several rounds of what are called the preliminary practices . In the Kagyu tradition, these preliminary practices are 100,000 long prostrations; 100,000 recitations of the 100-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva for purification; 100,000 offerings of the mandala of the universe in order to gain merit; and 100,000 prayers to the guru for the mind blessings. These are usually undertaken about five times, so you do half a million of each.

Why? Because it is considered that our minds are basically like a huge rubbish dump, and every day we're taking in more and more garbage. We're not clearing away very much, but we are piling in more and more. Trucks are coming along shoving in more and more garbage from television, books, conversations, movies. Right? There's a huge junk pile.

Now if we take a little seed of the pure teachings and plant it in that extremely hard earth, covered up with all this garbage, what hope does it have? However pure that seed may be, it has very little chance of actually germinating and growing. Even if it does manage

to germinate, it will come up very spindly and weak, because the ground is hard, it has never been worked and there's so much garbage. So first we have to work at clearing away the garbage and digging down in this very hard soil and then spreading fertilizer, watering it, making the ground ready.

Once the ground is nicely prepared, then if we plant our seeds and take care, make sure they have the sunshine of the guru's blessing, and water them with constant practice, they will grow up to be very strong, firm plants.

Now, it's very boring to cart away garbage and to work on the soil. It doesn't look like anything much is happening. But actually that initial work is extraordinarily important, because later we can get a great harvest. If we ignore that initial working, then no matter what profound practices we do or what great lamas we meet, it's very unlikely that we will actually gain good results.

So these preparatory practices are for purification and for gaining more and more positive karma. When we come to do the actual essential practice, there will be no obstacles and the realizations will come very quickly.

Therefore in our tradition, we spend several years doing the preparatory practices. In fact according to the commentaries, there is no set time or number to the amount of preparatory practices one does. One

should carry on doing them until one gets what are considered to be the signs and results of each practice.

For each particular practice there are certain dreams which one should have and those dreams should come not just once, but as recurrent dreams. There are certain indications—some kind of physical manifestation such as the body becoming very light and feeling very strong. It feels like you're flying. The mind becomes very clear, very open, very spacious.

However, in the meantime, it is a very salutary thing to spend some time doing your meditation practice. Many of you have different meditation practices, but it's always a good thing to at some time, even just for five or ten minutes, bring the mind to look and observe itself, as we explained in the beginning. To use the mind to look at the mind, keeping the mind very relaxed, but at the same time, very alert.

During the day we remember to just suddenly bring ourselves into this awareness and look at what the mind is doing at this moment. Not judging it, not changing it, not in any way fabricating, just knowing at this very moment what the mind is doing. And then we forget and we get caught up again. But as often as we can, it is good to remember to just stand back even for a few seconds and observe the mind.

If we do that, then gradually the mind begins slowly to get into the habit of being able to observe itself. Then those moments of remembering come more

and more rapidly, more and more often and begin to extend themselves until after a while, it becomes natural for the mind to observe itself. And as the mind really begins to observe itself, the thoughts naturally begin to become more slow and controlled. Those moments of seeing the gap in the thoughts will also become more and more frequent, more and more prolonged.

You see, when all these thought moments link up, then one is the state of constant awareness. One moment of awareness is one moment of nirvana, one moment of forgetfulness is one moment of samsara, as they say.

It's really very simple. The problem is, we don't do it.

Now we will sit for ten minutes. Please try to keep your back as straight as possible. Now just very quietly bring your attention first of all into this room. Know that you're sitting here, be in the body then bring your attention very quietly to the in-going and out-going of the breath. When the attention is fairly stabilized, very quietly bring your attention to the thoughts themselves, just see if you can see your thoughts. Don't try too hard, just relax and watch what is going on inside....

Don't try to stop it. Thoughts are not the problem; thoughts are the nature of the mind. Just like an ocean has waves, so the mind has thoughts, no problem. But don't chase after the thoughts, don't think of the

past, don't anticipate the future, don't hold on to the present. Just know what is happening in the mind, at this moment.

The essence of the practice is just to leave the mind in its natural state. That is very difficult for us to do. We are continually interfering by manufacturing thoughts, feelings, responses and judgements. We never can just be. We can never just allow the mind to be in its natural state, relaxed and present.

The essence of Mahamudra is to learn how to be simply present in the moment, without creating. When we can do that, then every moment arises fresh and vivid like the first moment. Normally because we see everything through the filter of our memories, judgements, biases, likes and dislikes, everything is actually second-hand and stale. This is often why we find life very boring and wearisome. We need new excitement, new experiences, something more exciting, more vivid.

But actually if we could just leave the mind quietly present in the moment, open and spacious, then every moment is like the first moment. Everything which happens has a clarity and newness. Then we could never be bored even for one moment.

So meditation and practice doesn't dull the mind. For the first time, in a way, the mind comes alive. Things become more vivid, more clear. It's like we've washed the filters. You know what it's like if you have a camera or binoculars which are always out of focus

and dirty. When you clean them and turn them until they are in focus, then everything suddenly becomes very sharp, very clear. It's like that.

Our minds are usually very out of focus, very dull. You see something beautiful which moves you, and you think, "Wow! That's wonderful!" You really appreciate it. And then the next time you see it, yeah, it's nice, and then the next time it's not so special. In the end you don't see it any more. You're looking for something new. We all do this.

But if we didn't have that heavy drag of all our past memories, past experiences and past judgements, then every time we saw something, it would be like the first time. So then the interest will be there. It's a very clear, sharp mind, not stale or dull.

That's why when you meet very great spiritual beings, they are almost like children. They find everything interesting, like a little child. Not childish, but child-like, there's a big difference. Most of us are very childish, but we are not child-like. But there is an innocence, an interest which children have in things. They get so excited over things that we are jaded about. "Yeah, we're all done this..." But there is a joy in very simple things that you meet in very realized beings, the same pleasure.

It's also a mind which is very fearless. Mostly our minds are full of fear. Everybody has their own individual demons which they are afraid of. Different

people have different demons. But when you have expunged all the demons from your mind, then you have a mind which is fearless. And because you are fearless, you can afford to be child-like, open, ingenuous, innocent. It's a very innocent mind.

It's very important to maintain a regular meditation practice for however short a time and then as much as possible integrate your practice into your daily life.

It's not enough just to sit. You also have to bring this quality of awareness, of attention, of knowing, as much as possible into your daily life. Nobody is really too busy to be aware, at least sometimes. While you are waiting for the computer program to load, while you are waiting for the traffic lights to change, when you are waiting for anything, while you're just sitting there, while you are walking, while you are talking, when you go to the bathroom, when you are drinking your tea or coffee.

There are infinite moments in a day where one can for two minutes or even a few seconds bring the mind right here and now, into the present, just knowing what is happening, knowing what the body is doing, knowing what the mind is doing, not judging it, not trying to change it, just knowing it. We can all do it.

Attachment And Love

In the tradition of the Buddhadharma, meditation is only one of the many qualities which is emphasized. It's a very important one because we have to understand our mind, and we can only understand our mind by looking at it.

But to be a well-balanced practitioner and reach our aim of being a totally integrated and realized being, we must develop many other essential qualities. Among these are generosity, tolerance, patience, ethics, loving kindness, compassion and so on. Now if we take something like ethics or loving kindness, it's obvious that one needs other people in order to practice. It's very easy living up in a retreat to be ethical, because there is no one to steal from, no one to lie to. It's no big deal to be patient. And to be generous, it is only necessary to throw out a few crumbs to the birds. Yes, very generous!

We need others. We need society in order to really exercise these essential qualities. So we start where we are, within the family. Again, it's very easy again to sit on our meditation cushion or to come here to a dharma centre. We sit here and we chant, "May all beings be well and happy, may they all be at ease, may they be endlessly filled with bliss." All those little sentient beings are out there on the horizon, over there somewhere. Somebody told me exactly this the other

day. She was sitting meditating on loving kindness and compassion. Then her kids came and knocked at the door and said “Mum we want this and this and this.” And she found herself screaming at her children, “Go away, I’m doing my loving kindness!!” Whoops!!

The point is that our children, our parents, our partner, our business colleagues, the people we meet, our neighbours—these are our practice. These are the ones with whom we have to genuinely develop loving kindness, compassion, patience, understanding. Sometimes I’ve lived with couples who have been Buddhist for maybe 20 or 30 years. To listen to the way that the husband and wife talk to each other, you would think they had never picked up a Buddhist book in their life. Where is all the teaching in the things they say to each other? You have to be very careful.

If we are really sincere about having the dharma in our heart the dharma starts right here, right now, with those beings—especially with those beings with whom we are for some reason karmically connected. Those are the people we have to work on. Those are the people with whom we really have to purify our hearts. Because if you cannot do it with them, then with whom else? This is very important. Otherwise we can have big fantasies about attaining enlightenment to save all beings when we cannot even be kind to our partner, or we cannot even develop a little understanding and sympathy for our children or our business colleagues.

Another area in which daily life is enormously helpful is in developing patience. The Buddha described patience as the highest austerity. He said that austerity is not about flagellating yourself or doing tremendous fasting, not sitting in the midst of fires in the way the way the Indians did. He said to forget these ideas of austerity, these tremendous tortures of the body. The real austerity is being patient with others.

Everybody encounters in their life—often in their daily life—people who seem to be born only to have the function of pushing all our buttons, who seem motivated to be difficult and to cause us problems. Instead of making us angry or wanting to retaliate, these people are actually our greatest spiritual friends. Because while it's very pleasant when everyone is being nice to us and all the situations in our life are running smoothly, we don't learn anything. It's easy to be loving towards people who are loving. That doesn't take any talent. The real test is to feel warm and have a sense of "May you be well and happy" towards someone who is really creating a lot of problems for us. It is important to understand this.

We think that we are in this life in order to try and arrange things to be as comfortable and pleasant as possible—if we can manage that, it's a good life. But cats and dogs are doing that. If somebody has a cat, you always know which is the most comfortable chair in the room, because that's the one the cat's going to

be in. Cats and dogs love making themselves comfortable. All they think about is having lots of sleep, being petted and eating. Do we want to end up in the realm of dogs and cats?

So if our life is motivated mostly by making ourselves nice and comfortable, evading anything which is difficult and trying to attract everything which is pleasant, then we are still caught in the animal realm. We are challenged when we are in situations and with people who are difficult. When events do not go the way we want them to go, or when we have something we treasure and we lose it—that's when we can see whether we really have dharma in our hearts or not.

Love

When the dharma talks about non-attachment and detachment, it doesn't mean a lack of love. Sometimes people don't understand how Buddhism can talk about compassion and love in one breath and non-attachment and all these qualities of renunciation in the other breath. But that's because we confuse love with clinging. We think that if we love somebody, the measure of our loving is that we want to hold on to them. But that's not love, that's just self-love, attachment. It's not genuinely loving the other person, wanting them to be well and happy—that's wanting them to make

us well and happy. This is very important, because we confuse it all the time.

When I was nineteen years old I told my mother, "I'm going to India" and she said, "Oh yes, when are you leaving?" She didn't say, "How can you leave me, your poor old mother, now you've got to the age when you're earning a living, how can you go and abandon me?" She just said, "Oh yes, when are you leaving?" It was not because she did not love me, it was because she did. And because she loved me more in a way than she loved herself, she wanted what was right for me, not what would make her happy. Do you understand? Her happiness came by making me happy.

That's love, and that is something which we all need very much to work on in our personal relationships. To hold people and possessions like this (hands outstretched to indicate holding something lightly in the palms) and not like this (fists clenched to indicate holding something very tightly). So that when we have them, we appreciate and rejoice in them, but if they go then we can let them go. Change and impermanence is the nature of everything.

You see, when we lose something we love, it's our attachment which is the problem, not the loss. That's what causes us grief. And that is why the Buddha taught that with attachment comes fear and grief. We have the fear of losing, and then we have the grief when we lose. Buddha never said that love causes grief.

Love is an opening of the heart. It's like the sun shining. The sun just naturally shines. It doesn't discriminate, shining on this person but not on that one. It just shines, because it's the nature of the sun to give warmth. Some people go inside and close the doors and windows; that's their problem. The sun is shining anyway. And it's that quality of heart which we have to develop. That quality of open, unconditional loving, no matter what. I'm going to love you if you do this but I'm not going to love you any more if you do that... parents do that, when their children don't obey.

Attachment to Objects

Genuine love and kindness is desperately needed in this world. It comes from appreciating the object, and rejoicing in the object, wanting the object to be happy and well, but holding it lightly, not tightly. And this goes for possessions too. You are in an extremely materialistic society in which the possession of more and bigger and better is held up as the total criteria for being happy. Then people get confused, because they come to the Buddhadharm and it teaches giving up, renunciation. People say, "Does that mean I have to give up my Mercedes or my beautiful condominium?" But the question is—do we possess the possessions, or do the possessions possess us?

The objects themselves are innocent. It's our grasping mind which is the problem. Remember the story I told earlier about the Indian King and his guru? When the Palace was burning down, the king was about to lose everything—all his gold, all his jewels. He didn't care, he was holding lightly. But the guru with just his little gourd begging bowl was holding tightly, so the guru suffered. Do you understand?

What we own is not the problem, it's our attitude towards our possessions. If we have something and we enjoy it, that's fine. If we lose it, then that's OK. But if we lose it and we are very attached to it in our heart, then that's not fine. It doesn't matter what the object is, because it's not the object which is the problem. The problem is our own inner grasping mind that keeps us bound to the wheel, and keeps us suffering. If our mind was open and could just let things flow naturally, there would be no pain. Do you understand? We need our everyday life to work on this, to really begin to see the greed of attachment in the mind and gradually begin to lessen and lessen it.

There's a famous story of a coconut, which is said to be used in India to catch monkeys. People take a coconut and make a little hole just big enough for a monkey to put its paw through. And inside the coconut, which is nailed to a tree, they have put something sweet. So the monkey comes along, sees the coconut, smells something nice inside, and he puts his

hand in. He catches hold of the sweet inside, so now he has a fist. But the hole is too small for the fist to get out. When the hunters come back, the monkey's caught. But of course, all the monkey has to do is let go. Nobody's holding the monkey except the monkey's grasping greedy mind. Nobody is holding us on the wheel, we are clinging to it ourselves. There are no chains on this wheel. We can jump off any time. But we cling. And clinging causes the pain.

Relationships

So we have to develop a very open loving attitude in our relationships with people. With everybody we meet, whether they are nice to us or not, we must have that initial feeling of "May you be well and happy". Just a good feeling. It doesn't mean we have to be stupid or that we can't see that some people are bad or are going to cheat us. To be non-judgemental doesn't mean that we are not discriminating. It means that we see the situation very clearly, we see clearly the kind of person before us, but we don't react with anger. We don't have to allow ourselves to be pushed around, we don't have to be doormats for others to wipe their feet on. We can be very clear about what this person's motivation is; we see it, and so can't be trapped, cheated or abused.

But we don't have to reply with the same kind of motivation. We don't have to answer anger with anger. We don't have to answer people who are mean by being mean back to them, right? We can be more skilful, we can bring intelligence into play. Buddhism is the path of being very intelligent. We use our understanding to respond intelligently and appropriately to situations as they arise.

Normally our problem is that we are so caught up in habitual responses that we are continually creating more and more negativity in our lives, more and more problems. We don't set out to do that—we set out to be happy and make others happy. Very few people wake up in the morning and think, "Oh, another day. I can spend it making myself and everybody around me as miserable as possible... let's go!" Most people want to be happy and don't want to cause too much trouble to others. But because we are so confused, however hard we try to be happy we seem to create more and more problems and negativity for ourselves, then spread it all around us. So we have to clear up our minds. It's not the environment which is the problem, it's our mind that's the problem.

The Third Teaching

Mindfulness

There are many ways to help unravel the confusion of the mind. A basic quality which is extremely useful for us all to develop in this lifetime is what is traditionally called mindfulness. Normally, whenever we do something, we are thinking of many other things at the same time. I will give an example.

There is a Vietnamese monk called Thich Nhat Hanh who talks about washing dishes in order to wash dishes. Normally when we have a sink full of dishes, our thought is that we will wash these dishes, then we'll get clean dishes and they will be out of the way and then we can do something else. And so when we wash the dishes we are trying to get it over with as quickly as possible. While we're washing the dishes we are thinking of something we did in our childhood, or something somebody said yesterday, what we're going to do later in the day, or what our spouse said to us yesterday and what we should have said back, or we worry about the children or the financial situation in Singapore, whatever. What we are not thinking about is the dishes.

Now this would not be so important a point, except that the next thing we do, which might even be some-

thing nice like having a cup of coffee and biscuit, gets the same treatment. We sit down to drink the coffee, but after the first sip we are thinking about something else again. “Oh god, now I’ve got to go upstairs, then I’ve got to do this, then I’ve got to go shopping, what should I buy...” And so it goes on and on, right? We are never present with what we are doing in this moment, and life just goes by. Even when we are doing something really nice, we appreciate it the first moment, but you watch—the next moment the mind’s gone off somewhere else, comparing it with something else we did before.

I like Tiramisu very much—a spongy cake with coffee and lots of cream—totally degenerate, but I love it. So when I eat Tiramisu, it is a very pleasurable thing. At the first mouthful, I’m completely with the Tiramisu. But by the second mouthful, I am comparing it with a Tiramisu I had somewhere else which was my idea of the perfect Tiramisu, and I’ve lost this one. For the rest of the mouthfuls, I’m not really eating it any more. It’s eating itself. I’m already somewhere else, with former glorious Tiramisus which this one should have been but isn’t.

We do this every day, not only with what we think of as unpleasant things like washing the dishes, but also with pleasurable things. We’re not there. We don’t experience it. Even if we’re speaking about it, we’re just

giving our version, our ideas, our opinions, our memories, our likes and dislikes. But the thing itself is lost.

So Thich Nhat Hanh says that instead of washing dishes to get clean dishes, we should wash dishes to wash dishes. In other words, we just wash the dishes because there they are. And while we are washing them we are completely with what we do. We know we're standing at the sink, we feel the water and the soap suds. We are conscious of every dish that we wash. We're just completely here. He says our mind is like a bottle on the ocean, being slapped up and down in all directions by the wind. But we are centred, completely centred. We experience what we are doing, we know we are washing dishes.

Now for any of you who have tried this, you would have discovered that it is extraordinarily difficult. It sounds very easy, but after the first minute the mind is already either thinking, oh this is easy, very easy to be mindful, I can be mindful any time, chatter, chatter. And where are you? You're not with the dishes, you were just thinking about the dishes. Or else you were doing dishes being mindful and "Why did I get that dish? Oh, I remember, my mother-in-law gave me that, yes, that was part of a set, I wonder what happened to the rest of the set..." Right?

It is extraordinarily difficult to remember to be present. It's easy to be present once we remember. But if we do that, if we bring that quality as much as pos-

sible into our daily life, it's as if we are seeing things for the first time. Life sometimes seems very boring and repetitive because we only live it at second and third hand through our interpretations, elaborations, ideas, memories, likes and dislikes. We don't see the thing in itself. So the Buddha said that mindfulness was like salt in the food, it makes it tasty. Food without salt has no taste. Our lives are like that. That's why people have to have more and more exciting things now — louder music, brighter lights, more stimulation, because life has no taste. So we have to come back into the present and add a little salt to our lives. That salt is to be aware, to be conscious.

Mindfulness is a huge subject and I've only skimmed the surface. But try to bring that quality of knowingness, of being present and knowing what we are doing while we are doing it, as much as possible into your life without interpretations, elaborations, and ideas. Just being naked in the present, in the moment, that alone can really transform our lives. We become much more centred, we become much less easily angered or irritated, we feel poised in the midst of situations and not as though we've been buffeted here and there.

We see things more clearly, especially people. We are able to pick up not just their words and facial expressions but somehow we become more sensitive to the situation, to what is appropriate and what is

not. And if we really continue this, we gain a kind of inner space, so that we are no longer completely thrown up and down by our thoughts and our emotions. We are able to see that we are not our thoughts and emotions. Our thoughts and emotions are mental states which rise and fall, but that is not us. We're able to connect more with that which knows. For this reason the Buddha very much emphasized that everybody should cultivate this quality of attention, of being present in the moment.

If you spend your days cultivating loving kindness, compassion, tolerance, ethics, non-harming, honesty, integrity and mindfulness, I think you will have a pretty full day and no one will complain then that they have no time for practicing dharma.

Questions and Answers

This talk was mainly in the form of a *Q & A* session in which Ven. Tenzin Palmo addressed questions about Tibetan Buddhism, her life in the cave, and her current efforts in establishing a nunnery in India.

Q. Society has some problems with the idea of a person spending twelve years alone in a cave meditating.

A. My first thought is that such a person must be terribly psychiatrically ill to choose to spend time in that way. And it makes me wonder if perhaps our asylums are full of people who would be better off sitting up in caves.

Q. Do you think that if you had not made that escape and had stayed in London, you might have been institutionalized?

A. Well, no, I don't think people who know me think I'm a psychiatric case! No. But more important is the second part. "Cave in the Snow" was written for a very general audience, not specifically for a Buddhist audience. It's been read by many people who are not actually Buddhist. I have received letters from people who relate that when they were young—sometimes children, sometimes adolescents—they spontaneously underwent very profound spiritual realizations. These completely turned their ordinary understanding of the world and what is important, what is not important, what is real, what is unreal, absolutely upside down. Because they were not inwardly prepared for this, they were thrown into a state of great crisis, made much more difficult by the fact that all the people around them thought they were crazy. They explained what

they had understood to their parents, or to their priests, their teachers and everybody said no, this is madness.

Because of this great split between what they realized about the nature of the ego, about the nature of the self, about the nature of what we perceive outside as actually being merely a moment-to-moment projection from our interior being, some were actually hospitalized because they couldn't cope, because society around them was saying, "You're crazy". They were not able to deal with their insights because of this extremely unsympathetic environment around them, while all the time within themselves they knew this was really true. It was only when they became adults and began to read books on Eastern spirituality that they suddenly realized, "Now, wait a minute, I was right all along!".

In Asia, someone who has this sort of experience will then go immediately to find a teacher and learn how to understand their insights and how to integrate them into their lives. So yes, there are definitely psychotic states, there are definitely levels of psychiatric problems too, it doesn't mean that everybody who is locked away should actually be sitting in a cave. But some should. On the other hand, if you are psychiatrically unbalanced, probably the worst place for you to be is in isolation. You actually have to be pretty balanced to stay by yourself.

One time I went on pilgrimage to Nepal for the winter and this friend of mine—a six foot two yoga expert, a big strapping guy—said he wanted to stay in the cave. He stayed a few weeks and then he had to go down to the village. He couldn't take the isolation. He said it was like heaven and hell, but mostly hell. And the state of my cave when I got back! So I would say actually it is not a refuge for those who cannot deal with society. The great meditators of the past have always been people of great inner balance and sanity. More sanity than the society, which is one of the reasons they chose to go away!

Q. How do you meditate for that long every day—twelve hours a day for twelve years? The second question is, could you tell us a little bit about the practices? They seem to vary so much from very simple practices to highly specialized practices like tummo (the yoga of inner heat).

A. Well, of course they belong to the Tibetan tradition, which is almost regimented. You usually have four periods a day of formal practice which last for about three hours, so you end up with twelve hours. Normally, one would get up long before dawn. I would usually get up around three in the morning and do the first practice. Then, tea or breakfast, whatever, then another session in the morning, then lunch, then a

break and then another session in the afternoon and then another session in the evening.

Normally in the Tibetan tradition, there are two main systems or streams. One kind of meditation is that which is directed upon the mind itself. This is the kind of meditation most people think of when you talk about meditation. They start by just being with the breathing in and breathing out and when the mind quiets down, they turn their attention onto the mind itself. Because if we think about it, we are normally always directed outwards to what we see, to what we hear, to what we are thinking.

We are very involved in and identified with what we are thinking and feeling. I feel happy, I feel sad, I feel enthusiastic, I feel impressed, I feel jealous, I feel angry, I think this, I like that, I don't like that, my opinion is this. We believe it, right? We are very identified with it and we are completely in the midst of it. So this type of meditation is to stand back and look at the thoughts and the emotions as merely mental states which arise, stay for a very short time, and then disappear to be replaced by something else. Waves on the ocean of the mind. And then once one has begun to understand what the thought or the feeling is, then one turns that attention back onto the knower itself. To know the knower. So this is one kind of meditation.

The other stream of meditation which was developed in India and then taken into Tibet is called tantra.

Tantra makes use of very elaborate visualizations of various Buddhas, Bodhisattvas or deities, either in a peaceful or wrathful aspect. This is to make use of a faculty of creative imagination, but it's a very structured creative imagination. It's not arbitrary; nothing is arbitrary. Every single little jewel is documented—exactly how you see it, how the deity appears. And so one trains one's mind and then lights go out and lights come in. It's like an internal movie which is going on. This is not just to train the mind in knowing how to visualize. These images spontaneously arose from enlightened minds in the past, and by replicating these visualizations we are able to access extremely profound levels of the mind which are not accessible to an ordinary lineal kind of consciousness. At deeper levels we think in images and so because these are images coming from an enlightened mind, it helps us somehow. It becomes a conduit to opening up very profound inner levels. This really is true—you have to take my word for it.

Q. When you are doing this, do you focus on the different chakras as part of the meditation?

A. Well, the first part is to get the visualization. Then, when the visualization is stable, it goes onto the second part which has to do with the chakras, or different psychic centres of the body, the manipulation of the

energies and this kind of internal yoga which is called tummo. Tummo is for generating inner psychic heat and this again is because in inner yoga we all have certain inner psychic channels where the prana or the Qi flow, especially through the central channel. But this is blocked and cut off. This is one of the reasons why our minds are so wild, so undisciplined and full of anger, greed and delusions—because the inner energies in the body are out of balance. They are not flowing in the channels which they should be flowing in, they're flowing in other channels. And so these inner yogas are for opening up the inner central channels and causing the prana or the Qi energy to enter into the central channel. When that happens, it undoes the knots in the various chakras and then spontaneous insights or realizations occur very quickly.

Q. At the heart of the visualization did you use any physical movements to help?

A. Well, they use pranayama, they use visualization, they have special exercises which they do. So with all that, you see, it takes up a lot of the day. The days pass very quickly.

Q. Did you know this before you went up, that you were going to spend twelve years there?

A. No, I had no idea. I had already been living for six years in a monastery there. I wanted to find somewhere quieter and more conducive to practice, because the monastery was just too sociable. And so when we found this cave, then my thought was just to go and do some practice. I had no idea how long I would stay there. One year led into another led into another. And I sometimes would stand outside and think, “Well, if you could be anywhere in the world, where would you want to be?” And I couldn’t think of anywhere else I wanted to be. Then I thought, “If you could do anything in the world you wanted, what would you want to do?” and there was nothing else I wanted to do. So I stayed. It was very nice.

I mean, yes, it was difficult. There was six months of winter and you had a lot of snow and the cave got soaking wet and there was this and there was that, but so what? It was so beautiful and so silent. The people were very supportive and my lama was not so far away. It was a valley which was very blessed—it had a very special quality. I wanted to practice and it was the perfect place to do that. One was very safe. There are not that many places you could point to where a woman can be isolated and feel completely safe. So I realized that this was a unique opportunity to be there, I was very lucky to have the good karma to have arrived in such a lovely place, why move?

Q. Did you have any contact with your parents at all at that time? It must have been very hard for your mother.

A. Well, I wrote to her in the summer. Of course during the long months of winter I couldn't write because it was cut off. Not only was it snowing in Lahoul, but on either side of the Lahoul valley there are very high passes which would be blocked. The main pass into Manali is blocked usually from November to July. So I would write her in the summer and in 1984 I went back. I hadn't been back for eleven years so I thought I should go back to see her before I started my final three year retreat when I wouldn't be coming out or writing letters.

Q. How did your letters get out of Lahoul?

A. In the summer there was traffic—there were even buses. It's only that it was for a short period. Then, once snow falls, that's it. In the spring, they would have runners—men with mailbags on their backs who would run over the pass.

Q. When you actually began the search and began some of the practices, did you ever feel stupid? Did you

ever feel that you would never get it, that it was awkward? Did you ever think, “I’ll never get there?”

A. Yes. I think everybody has difficulties. I don’t know of anybody who just sits down and gets it, unless it is a very great lama who’s been doing it for many lifetimes.

Q. But never to the point where you thought that this was a useless quest?

A. No. It never seemed useless. I might feel I was useless, but not the practices, no.

Q. How to know when you meet somebody what they were in their previous life? You met your lama again after he died, as the 9th Khamtrul Rinpoche. Were you convinced as soon as you met him? Was there an “electric spark”?

A. Yes, my lama died at the age of forty-eight in 1980, and then he was reborn by the end of the year of 1980 and we brought him back to the monastery when he was about two and a half. I met him when he was nearly three. I arrived in Tashi Jong and I kept making excuses to put off seeing him; I had to take a shower first or I had to do this, I had to do that. I was putting it off because I felt very nervous about meeting him

again. And also I was convinced that when he saw me he would think “Who’s this strange-looking nun?” and burst into tears and then I would feel upset. I kept thinking, “He’s just a little boy — don’t worry if he goes “Arrgh!!” and runs for cover.”

When I went in to see him he was sitting on his seat, just sitting there, with his hair all in a little top knot. I started prostrating and he looked at me and then he had this big smile. He started laughing and laughing and he said to his assistant monk, “Look, that’s my nun, that’s my nun!”. He jumped up. “It’s my nun, it’s my nun!” And then he started giving me fruit and toys and we spent the whole morning just playing together. What can I say? You know, the way he would look at me. Sometimes we would be playing and suddenly he would look at me exactly the way the previous Khamtrul had done, exactly the same look in his eyes as if he looked straight through my eyes. I don’t think there could be any doubt. He was three years old. If anybody came to see him (and people were always coming to see him) he would drop what he was doing and just go sit on his seat, and give them fruit and a blessing. If they stayed for hours he would just sit there perfectly calm. When they left he would say, “Have they gone?” “Yes, Rinpoche”. Then he would get back down and start playing again. Then when somebody else came in, he would just drop his toys and go sit down.

Q. What did you do for another lama teacher after he passed away? Did you need to find another teacher?

A. Well, as it happened, my second teacher after Khamtrul Rinpoche was His Holiness Sakya Trizin, who is the head of the Sakya. He was giving a three month teaching and initiation on something called the 'Path and its Fruit' which is the main Sakya teachings. He had asked me to come for that. That was a year after my lama had passed away, so through that, I got myself re-established with him again as one of my teachers. Also in Tashi Jong which was my lama's community, there were many yogis and other incarnate lamas who have been my teachers.

Actually, although Khamtrul Rinpoche was my lama, he didn't actually teach me very much. He would say you should do this or do that, you know, I'll give you the empowerment for such and such, but he himself didn't usually specifically sit down and say this means this, this means this, and then you think that and then you do this. Other people would do that. He was just there to indicate where I should go. When you start, you go to the lama and say, "Rinpoche, what should I do?" But as the years go on and I gained more inner confidence in what my path was, then I found myself going to him more and more and saying, "Rinpoche, I am thinking of doing so and so, is that all right?" And then he would say, "Yes that's OK, I'll

give the empowerment and go to so-and-so to get the teaching.” You begin to get your own inner guide. By the time he left us, I more or less knew what I was doing and where I was going. For other people who had only just met him, it was much more traumatic in that sense.

Q. Can you tell us a little bit about your nunnery?

A. I lived in Lahoul which is a Buddhist Himalayan valley, next to Ladakh. The nice thing for me in Lahoul while I was there was that there were both monks and nuns. They shared the same monastery. Everybody had their own little house, but nonetheless it was very obvious that the nuns were the ones who did all the work and the monks were the ones who did all the rituals. While the monks were out front doing the rituals and getting the teachings, the nuns were in the back doing the cooking. The nuns were basically household servants. So I felt very sorry about this because many of the nuns I met were actually very bright and intelligent girls.

I will give you an example. One of the nuns in our monastery was a girl named Zangmo. She had come from a very good family. Her family wanted her to get married and arranged her marriage, but she said, “No, I want to be a nun.” They said no, no, no, you must marry so-and-so — it’s a very good connection for our

family. She had very long thick black hair in plaits, and the night before the marriage, she got a pair of scissors and cut it all off. It's not like here where you can have nice short hair and nobody cares; in Lahoul you cannot. A woman's long hair is her pride and glory. So when her family saw her with short locks, they said, "All right, you win." So she became a nun and went to stay with a very lovely Tibetan lama who spent much of his time in Lahoul, Pangi, and Ladakh, teaching the border regions which most Tibetans ignore completely. He really revived the whole meditation and practice tradition there. He was a wonderful lama.

And so Zangmo went to stay with him. She had given up a lot. She was from a wealthy family and she could have been the lady of the house in her new home. But what was she doing with the Rinpoche? She was in the kitchen doing the cooking and taking care of the children. She lived with him for 10 years and travelled all around with him, but she got practically nothing as far as teachings were concerned. And yet any ragamuffin in a male body that came in off the streets would be given all the deepest, most profound teachings and set down to do a three year retreat. And when one sees that, then one thinks — no, there's something not quite right here.

Recently I saw a video about a nun from Ladakh, which used to be part of Western Tibet. Now it's part of India, next to Kashmir. This Ladakhi nun is

trying to arrange teaching programmes for nuns, so she arranged a week's teaching programme on monastic rules. And they did a video of this and one of the old nuns in the video said, "I have been a nun for forty years and this is the first teaching I have ever received."

So this is the situation—even though you get bright girls who are very keen, very devoted, it's as if there's this brick wall. It's not the same in the Chinese tradition, but in this tradition it is like that. What we're trying to do is to create a nunnery and an institution for girls, especially from the border regions like Ladakh, and Lahoul, Keylong, Spiti, Nepal, even Bhutan. They all belong to the same tradition that I belong to. There are various traditions in Tibetan Buddhism, but our tradition for some reason is spread along this border area. What we want to do is to create the facilities so that girls can come and study philosophy, be educated and also learn English. At the same time, they will be taught meditation practice and the emphasis will be on practice also. My hope is that in the future some of these girls will be able to go back to their own places and regenerate what's happening there.

Things are changing. I'm not the only person that's doing this sort of thing. There are now nunneries starting where nuns are studying philosophy and they're doing debating which is the Tibetan method for study-

ing. They have opposing partners and they debate philosophical questions. They took this method of learning and sharpening the understanding from the ancient Indian universities. But traditionally women didn't do that; it wasn't considered lady-like. It wasn't considered that women needed that.

There are social obstacles. I once asked my lama Khamtrul Rinpoche why there were so few female incarnate lamas. In the Tibetan system, they have this method of recognizing the reincarnations of great lamas, like the Dalai Lama being the 14th Dalai Lama. When a great lama dies, then they look for the reincarnation and almost all of these are males, with one or two exceptions.

I asked why there are so few female tulkus. He replied, "Look, when my sister was being born, she had more signs at the time of her birth than I did." These signs include rainbows appearing and water in the offering bowls turning into milk, slight earthquakes—these are signs at the time of birth which make people think something special is coming. Everybody said, "Oh, what's coming?" But then when she was born as a girl, they just said "Whoops, mistake". Even though whoever she was, she didn't have the opportunity to study, to meet great masters, to be encouraged on the spiritual path in the way she would have had if she had been a boy. So that's why we didn't come back in female form, because socially there were

so many more obstacles to pursuing the spiritual path and even if we did come back we weren't recognized.

Q. I've been very curious about the Karmapa debate. I saw this movie at the Singapore Film Festival. A Finnish man spent about three years making a movie about the two Karmapas, the two boys. The Dalai Lama is interviewed in the movie, and he says that there is precedent for simultaneous reincarnation. Can they simultaneously reincarnate?

A. Yes, yes, many lamas do. My own lama, Khamtrul Rinpoche, we know has at least two incarnations. One is in Darjeeling, one is with us.

Q. And it is not a huge controversy?

A. No, not at all. The one in Darjeeling looks exactly like the previous one. And the people in Tashi Jong all say how extraordinary it is because it's just like being in the presence of the previous one.

Q. Why do they reincarnate simultaneously?

A. I asked Khamtrul Rinpoche, "How do they do that?" And Rinpoche said, "Well, ordinary people like you and me cannot do things like that because we still believe in an ego." And as long as we believe in an ego,

in someone who is doing what we do, who is thinking our thoughts, it creates this one stream of consciousness which then will be reborn again and again, but usually just in one stream. When we have realized the truth of non-self then there's nothing to hold it together. Then the wisdom mind takes over and it can emanate infinitely in order to help beings, in many different realms, not even just in the human. But in many forms, some will be recognized, many will not be recognized. You're no longer held together by this idea that there is a 'me'.

Q. Can I ask how are you doing with the fund raising for your nunnery?

A. Well, our major step forward was finally finding the land—I have been looking for it for the past 6 months. The area is very beautiful. If any of you have been to Himachal Pradesh where we are, it's a very lovely part of India. Sometimes people think of India as just heat and dust and lepers and, nowadays, pollution. But our part of India in the north west is very nice. It's hills, snow mountains in the distance, streams and trees, and it's very pretty. Because it's so pleasant and Kashmir now is undergoing so many traumas, many people are looking to Himachal as being the next ideal holiday spot. Many people are moving into the area and so it's becoming rapidly built up. It's still empty

by Himachali standards, but the villages are getting bigger. People from the Punjab are coming and buying up land. So it was quite difficult to find land which was close to my lama's monastery.

By the way, I should mention that I'm doing this nunnery because the lamas asked me to do it. This was not my idea. First of all many years ago Khamtrul Rinpoche said, "I want you to start a nunnery." I just said "Yes, Rinpoche" and the subject was dropped. Then about five years ago, the high lamas in my monastery said, "Look we don't have a nunnery, this really is a lack, will you please start a nunnery." I thought, "Yes, you're right—this is what I have to do." So they are very supportive.

I don't want it to sound as if it's us against them, it's nothing like that. The lamas and the monks have all the way through been extremely supportive. They're always offering their help, saying, "Whatever we can do to help let us know, we will help teach the nuns, we will help train them, we will do whatever we can." I just wanted to mention that.

So we were looking for land, and the monks also have been looking for land in the area. Every time we found a nice piece, it would be too small and usually there are other Indian villages nearby. Now Indian villages are extremely noisy and one has to look ahead ten years, by which time five houses would have expanded to fifteen or twenty. So this is not suitable,

because apart from the nunnery, we're also going to have an international retreat centre for women, where women from all over can just come and meditate in whatever way they wish.

In India it's very difficult to find a place which is quiet and safe if you are a woman and want to go away and do your retreat. So I needed quite extensive land in order to build the nunnery, the nun's college, the nun's retreat centre and an international retreat centre, plus a small clinic for the local people and guest houses.

Just before I came to Singapore, I was walking at six o'clock in the morning and someone said to me, "Well, there's this land over here, go have a look. And there it was, basically. It's actually a hundred acres. I mean we can't afford to buy a hundred acres, but we could buy forty five. It's a pine forest surrounded by Indian government forest land so it's extremely quiet. There are no villages. It just leads to a kind of precipice and behind it are the mountains. There are the towns and villages two kilometres down the road.

The owner wants to sell half. But nowadays prices have gone up a lot, and so to buy even forty five acres of land, it costs four thousand US dollar per acre. This is forest land, not agricultural land which is more expensive.

Q. If this nunnery had existed when you were thirty-three, do you think you would still have gone up into the cave or could you have found the same thing there?

A. By the time I was thirty three, it's possible. I became a nun when I was twenty one and at that time, especially, I really wanted to go into a nunnery and be trained, but there were no nunneries. Oh, it would have been wonderful if this nunnery existed at that time.

Q. Can we talk about the Togden and the Togdenmas? Are you interested in preserving that special heritage?

A. In our monastery, which is called Khampagar, there are a group of yogis who are monks. They have monastic ordination but they have dreadlocks and instead of wearing maroon robes, they wear white and in Tibet they lived in caves. You know, it's really difficult for me to talk about the Tongden, they're so much a part of my heart, but its difficult to express why. I think if I had any inspiration in my life it was the Togdens. Anyway, they are very special. They basically spend all their lives in retreat. Even when they're not in retreat, still they're carrying on their practice. They really are very great practitioners like Milarepa, follow-

ing in Milarepa's tradition. One recently died, but now we have three of those and seven in training.

Now, in Tibet my lama also had a nunnery with four hundred nuns and within that nunnery, there were also the female form of these yogis. They were called Togdenma and they were like the Togden. They wore the same kind of dreadlocks and the same kind of robes and they also lived in caves behind the nunnery. As far as we know, none of these survived the cultural revolution. But people who met them before the Chinese takeover say that they were really very extraordinary. They were famous throughout Tibet for their qualities.

When I was young—about twenty-three—I told my lama that I wanted to be a Togdenma and he was so happy. He bought this long silk kathag. In those days most of these long white scarves were made of cheese cloth, but he went out and came back with a long silk one and he draped it around my neck and said, "In Tibet I had so many Togdenma and now I don't have even one. And so I really pray that you will re-establish the Togdenma tradition." And then he told the Togden and they said, "Great, send her along to us. We'll train her. Then the lay people and the monks heard about this and they said, "No way a girl is going to live with our Togden. Forget it." So I never could do it, because it's the kind of training where you really have to be with your teacher. They really have to watch

you moment to moment to see how you are doing, and there are certain mind things for which you need to be in a very conducive atmosphere. For example, at a certain point you're supposed to say and do what comes into your mind.

Q. So are you saying that it's dangerous?

A. It's dangerous and also difficult to practice except in an environment where you have sympathetic people who know what you're going through.

And so I could never do that. But still my aspiration is to re-start this tradition again. If I myself can't do it, never mind. At least I hope somehow we can be the tool, the instrument to re-introduce it. It's a very precious female lineage, unique in the Tibetan tradition. There isn't anything quite like it anywhere else. And it's something which is passed on from person to person, not just something read in books. So as a mind-to-mind transference and also a transmission, you have to have living embodiments to pass it on. When I said to the Togden that I wanted to do this, their comment was "OK, great, but you better be quick because we are not getting any younger." The youngest one is sixty five.

Q. Do you set goals for yourself in terms of achieving Enlightenment, or do you not try to do that? Is it just going to happen if it's going to happen at all?

A. I especially try to talk to Singaporeans about this one. Don't set aims, don't set goals. Your whole life is already one set of aims and goals, and that's why you are so stressed out. Don't do that in your meditation, don't do that in your spiritual practice. Just do your practice because it's a nice thing to do. If you go into retreat, go into retreat because what could be nicer than to be in retreat and have lots of time to do your practice? Just enjoy doing the practice for the practice, whatever results come or don't come will just happen. But as soon as you start making aims and goals, then you've already created this big obstacle and it just becomes another ego enhancement. So I think the important thing in any kind of practice is just do it to do it.

Q. How important is it to have a teacher?

A. That's such a difficult question. Obviously, the very best is if you do find a genuine teacher, someone that you can be with a bit and get actual guidance from and so forth. Obviously that is the very best situation. It's as though we're trekking in an unknown region. If you're by yourself, even though you have guidebooks and

maps, you still have to be very careful because things don't look the same on the ground as they look on the map. And if you make a wrong turn you're likely to end on a precipice or down a cliff and so you have to go very carefully. You're likely to make a lot of wrong turns and waste a lot of time and there's always this hesitation, especially if you encounter things and wonder—what do I do now? People get very frightened.

If you have a competent guide who knows really what is what, then you can just go ahead. They say, "Go right", and you go right. Obviously it's much easier. You'll be much more confident if something comes up that they will know how to deal with it. They will understand what it is, you have that confidence. So it's obviously much quicker and much more foolproof. The problem is finding a teacher. And in the meantime to sit around waiting until the perfect teacher appears while not doing anything from your side would also be very counter-productive. There is a lot we can do for ourselves with the help of books, with the help of talks, and with the help of our common sense.

Q. Is there something that you would have us take away from this meeting with you?

A. I think that we are in this world apart from anything else to really cultivate the mind on many levels

and to open up the heart. And anything we can do which helps us do that is a good thing.

We all come from many different backgrounds. We each have such very different histories, not just in this lifetime but in many lifetimes, so we are all coming from very different places. And in this lifetime we all have very different lessons to learn and different experiences which we need to undergo to help us to grow.

If one considers us all as like little children, then what we are trying to do is to mature. And all of us are maturing at our own rates. Certain experiences will mature one person and not another. So it's not that everybody has to do things the same way, or this is the right thing to do and this is not the right thing to do. For different people at different times and in different places, there are infinite amounts of experiences which have to be undergone, and some things which don't need to be undergone at all.

But the goal is to really understand the mind, to bring clarity into our mind and to learn how to tame our untamed minds, our wild emotions, our wild thoughts, to really begin to understand our inner life and to cultivate the mind and to make the mind increasingly clear and full of genuine understanding. Along with that, to open up the heart with loving kindness and compassion, so that we really do experience the happiness and suffering of others, that we're not

just trying to make ourselves happy and cosy in this lifetime. That's very important.

Dogs and cats have the same idea to make themselves happy and cosy in this lifetime. There's more to it than that. The fact is that we are human beings. We should use our human potential and not just slip back into being glorified dogs and cats. Do you understand? I mean, all animals want to be comfortable, they want to have nice food, they want to have sex. We always know what is the most comfortable chair in the house because that's where the cat's sleeping.

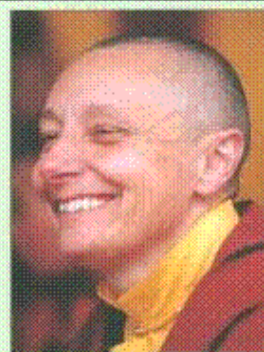
It's a tremendous waste of the human life to just devote our lives to that level. We have such great potential. If we think just being comfortable will bring us happiness, then we are very mistaken. Our happiness really lies in bringing happiness to others, so in whatever sphere of life we may be, we can all do that.





THREE TEACHINGS

Tenzin Palmo's Teachings on Retreat, Mahamudra Practice and Mindfulness are a delight to read. Transcribed from talks she gave in Singapore in May 1999, the Teachings are delivered in plain language, seasoned with plenty of audience participation. Each subject is discussed with humour, liveliness and compassion. She has the great gift of showing how the Dharma can be integrated into every part of our everyday lives.



TENZIN PALMO

Born in London in 1943, Tenzin Palmo travelled to India and was ordained as a Buddhist nun in 1964. Her 12-year retreat in a cave high in the Himalayas, described in the book 'Cave in the Snow', focused international attention on the role of women and their spirituality in the Buddhist context. Today, Tenzin Palmo shares her wisdom as she travels and teaches around the world. Her vision is to build a convent in Northern India dedicated to helping women achieve spiritual excellence. For further information and updates on the nunnery project,

please visit www.tenzinpalmo.com or email eliz_palmo@hotmail.com

Three Teachings