

Contents (click on any heading to view text)

To eliminate obstacles to the far-reaching attitude of joyous effort, abandon:

23. With attachment, spending time idly talking and joking.

To eliminate obstacles to the far-reaching attitude of meditative stabilization, abandon:

24. Not seeking the means to develop concentration, such as proper instructions and the right conditions necessary to do so. Not practicing the instructions once one has received them.

25. Not abandoning the five obscurations which hinder meditative stabilization: excitement and regret, harmful thought, sleep and dullness, desire, and doubt.

26. Seeing the good qualities of the taste of meditative stabilization and becoming attached to it.

To eliminate obstacles to the far-reaching attitude of wisdom, abandon:

27. Abandoning the scriptures or paths of the Theravada as unnecessary for one following the Mahayana.

28. Exerting effort principally in another system of practice while neglecting the one one already has, the Mahayana.

29. Without a good reason, exerting effort to learn or practice the treatises of non-Buddhists which are not proper objects of one's endeavor.

30. Beginning to favor and take delight in the treatises of non-Buddhists although studying them for a good reason.

Auxiliary Vow 23: (To Abandon) With Attachment, Spending Time Idly Talking and Joking

And then number 23, to avoid gossiping out of attachment. We've been through this one a number of times, in various forms. This is basically spending our time idly talking, joking, hanging out, blah, blah, blah, di, di, di ..., with attachment. Telling stories -- some people like war stories, some people like love stories, some people like horror stories, and some people like adventure stories, some people like their own stories (laughter), whatever it is.

This is an obstacle to developing joyous effort. because when we hang out. we're keeping our mouth very busy. Often our ears aren't nearly as busy as our mouth, even though we have twice as many ears as mouth, we don't listen half as well as we talk. To really develop a mind that takes delight in what is virtuous, we have to calm the mind that takes delight in wasting time. Like we've talked before, that doesn't mean we don't chitchat with people. We can when there's a purpose, when we know what we're doing, when the topic of conversation doesn't go around to anything that's harmful to anybody. It's always good, when the conversation becomes a little bit difficult, to change the subject.

In circumstances like, if you don't know somebody very well, and you're trying to develop a relationship, you might just kind of chitchat about this and that, but you're doing it with a motivation to develop a relationship where you can be of service to that person. You're not just doing it so that you can feel good, so that you can make yourself look big, so that you can be amused, so that you can say, "Well, I couldn't practice the Dharma because this person kept me on the phone all night," even though you were doing most of the talking.

So these obstruct us from developing joyous effort. Joyous effort is really important on the path because when we have delight in what is virtuous, then the whole practice becomes much easier. So often we feel like, "Oh, I just don't have enough energy." We do have lots of energy but usually our energy is for things that aren't so virtuous. We've lots of energy to go out to the bar and drink, go dancing, go do this, and go do that. But not so much energy for meditation. It's just a thing of rechanneling the energy.

Auxiliary Vows 24 - 26: To Eliminate Obstacles to the Far-reaching Attitude of Meditative Stabilization

Now the next ones have to do with eliminating obstacles to the far-reaching attitude of meditative stabilization or concentration. Meditative stabilization is very important in our practice because even if you develop understandings of different levels of the path, if you can't hold your concentration firmly on those understandings, then it's very difficult for them to become part of you. If you meditate on love, you get this kind of loving feeling, and then bam! your mind is off thinking about chocolate cake, and it's difficult to recreate the loving feeling again. So concentration is really important so that we can make those understandings part of us.

Auxiliary Vow 24: (To Abandon) Not Seeking the Means to Develop Concentration, such as Proper Instructions and the Right Conditions Necessary to Do So

What we should avoid is not seeking the means to develop concentration, such as proper instructions and the right conditions necessary to do so. Or not practicing the instructions once we have received them. So, before we meditate to develop calm abiding, or zhi-na or samatha (these are all the same terms. "Samatha" is the Sanskrit, "Zhi-na" is the Tibetan, "Calm-abiding" is the English), we need to have proper teachings on those. It's not a thing of, "Ok, I'm going to sit down and concentrate!" Rather, we have to hear teachings about how to do it, how to meditate on concentration. That's quite important.

Actually, His Holiness commented on it at the Teacher's Conference last year, because the topic came up at one point: why is it that some people who supposedly have these incredible realizations then act unethically? And His Holiness said, "Well, maybe their realizations aren't what they thought they were." And one way that you can have "wrong" realizations or insufficient realizations is when you're in the process of developing calm-abiding. At a certain point, it's very easy to get stuck and think that you have clarity and stability - mistakenly think that you have actualized calm-abiding - when actually the clarity isn't very intense, and there's a level of subtle mental dullness there. His Holiness said this is due to not having proper teachings. So, when we get into that subject later on, when we cover the six far-reaching attitudes, we'll go into all the steps in calm-abiding, and how to do it. That's important to know.

So this vow is, first of all, not having any interest in developing concentration, and even if you have interest, meditating on it without teachings, or not seeking teachings on it. Just kind of being very lax in that way. So that just makes a big obstacle because if we don't know what we're doing, it's hard to do it. And it's easy to go awry.

Also, it's extremely important to try to get the right conditions to meditate. If you go and do a samatha retreat, and if you don't have the right external conditions, even if you try, you won't get the results. So it's very important in that kind of retreat, to have a secluded place, to minimize your activities, to train your mind in being content, to have a supportive community nearby, to have a quiet place where you don't hear water, you don't hear other people, animals, things like this, because these make a lot of noise, and they interfere with your concentration. It doesn't mean that you meditate in a vacuum, but when you go and choose a place to meditate, you try and get a conducive one. We should make an effort to get that kind of quiet place.

[In response to audience question] If you've already realized zhi-na, then that's not going to bother you. The only other way for the water and the cars not to bother you is that your internal noise is greater (laughter) -- I can't pay attention to the cars because my internal chatter is too loud!

Auxiliary Vow 25: (To Abandon) Not Abandoning the Five Obscurations which Hinder Meditative Stabilization

Then number 25: Not abandoning the five obscurations which hinder meditative stabilization. So, once we've gotten the teachings, we'll want to try and meditate properly. Here, what we want to try and do is overcome the five obscurations that hinder the generation of concentration.

1st obscuration: (a) excitement, (b) regret

1(a) Excitement (or restlessness of body and mind)

The first obscuration has two parts: one part is excitement, and the other part is regret. Actually, instead of excitement, I like the translation of restlessness better. Because when we're restless, it's definitely an obstacle to concentrating, isn't it? The body is restless, you can't sit still, you're itching, you're twitching, you want to get off and move. Maybe you've taken too much caffeine, whatever it is, because it takes a while for the body to calm down so you can sit still. The body is restless, or the mind is restless. It's like a kid that runs here, and runs there, and runs here, and runs there...all over the place. Anybody experienced that? (laughter)

[In response to audience question: which comes first, your body or your mind?] You have to balance them. Because if every time your body is uncomfortable, you try and make your body comfortable, you're never going to be comfortable. Because, "Well, I can't sit in this position. I got to stretch this leg out." Then you sit like that. "No, I got to sit in the chair. No, the chair is not comfortable. I have to lie down. No, my back hurts when I lie down. I have to sit up." It's completely useless to make your body completely comfortable.

But, trying to do some macho trip of, "I'm going to sit here and face the pain! And it's killing me and I can't do anything else but sit here and ...(trying to endure)" That's really stupid too. So, what we need is some kind of balance. When the pain is too intense, shift the body. But don't shift the body every time it's uncomfortable. Because you'll be shifting the body every thirty seconds. And try not to form bad habits, like leaning against the wall, unless you have a physical disability. If you have a physical disability, lean against the wall. Do what you need to do. But if you don't have a physical disability, try and train your back muscles slowly. Just sit up straight. It's good to make short meditation sessions. Don't make your sessions too long. So make a short one, and then if you need to, stand, walk around the room once, sit down, and then do another session. Don't stand, go into the other room, turn on the TV for ten minutes, then come back. That's not such a good idea.

Now the restless mind: that's the mind that hears this sound, that hears that sound, that smells this, that's thinking about that, that's going here, and going there. The mind that hears one thing and then starts building a story on it, the mind that just wanders and is restless and agitated. We should try and calm that down. That has to do with cultivating this mind of introspective alertness, where we know what's going on in our mind, so that if the restlessness comes up, we're able to identify it, and then renew our mindfulness and bring ourselves back to our object of concentration. And in this light also, if you're having a lot of problems with physical restlessness, it's good to make sure you're getting enough exercise and to do some yoga, or do Tai-chi. Do something with your body. I think that is quite helpful. But also be patient. Because it does take a while for the whole energy in your body to change so that you can sit still. So be patient, but continue to work on it.

It could be helpful to look at what you're eating. If you're eating a lot of sugar, it might cause some distraction, give you a big sugar rush and a big sugar letdown in your meditation. Caffeine, not so much tea, but coffee, just makes you wired. So see if it's contributing to the restlessness.

Watch the restlessness. Don't just give in to it. With the physical restlessness, it's quite interesting to watch what that feels like in your body. Instead of always following it, moving it and twitching it, just watch that restless energy. It's quite interesting. For the mental restlessness, you need this mental factor introspective alertness that can identify what's going on in the mind, and when you identify the mind is restless and distracted, then to renew the mindfulness on the object of concentration, be that the breadth or the image of the Buddha, or the feeling of loving-kindness or whatever it is.

1(b) Regret

And then the other part of this one is regret. This could be regret for past negative actions, something like this. When you have a lot of regret over past negative actions that prevents you from concentrating on what you're concentrating on, because you're feeling so remorseful for what happened in the past, that kind of regret is good because it leads us to do purification. That's a positive kind of regret. Though it's better not to do the negative actions in the first place because then we don't get the regret that distracts us.

A negative kind of regret is when you're sitting there regretting being there to start with: "Why am I doing this retreat? Why am I doing this meditation? I really regret sitting here, I'd much rather do something else." Or a kind of brooding mind where you just sit and brood. The mind is kind of remorseful and brooding... so that becomes an obstacle too. What's very helpful when you have these kinds of things is to try and understand where they're coming from. You can't just say, "Don't have them," but see where they're coming from. If it's some kind of regret from past negative actions, do purification. If it's regretting being there and doing the retreat, then meditate instead on the advantages of doing the retreat. If you're just brooding in general, then sit and watch the brooding and try and see what's motivating it. See what's behind it, what the mind is up to. Do some research on it, then you might get some clarity how to dispel it.

So those two together, are the first of five obstructions. Don't ask me why they put two completely different things as one, I haven't figured it out.

2nd obscuration: harmful thought

Then the second one is harmful thought. So here is our old friend, maliciousness, again. Ill will, wanting revenge, wanting to get even, wanting to retaliate, this mind that is thinking of harmful thoughts towards other people. So here the antidote would be to meditate on loving kindness, on patience, on all those antidotes to anger.

3rd obscuration: sleep and dullness

Sleepy mind

Then the third one is sleep and dullness. The sleepy mind becomes a clear obstacle when you try to meditate. You're concentrating and you're meditating and then ..(snoring sound).. So antidotes to that are first, try and sleep the right amount. If you sleep too much, you're often more tired. If you only sleep three hours a night, then you're often tired. So try and sleep a correct amount. Also, they really recommend going to bed earlier and waking up at dawn or just before dawn if you can, rather than staying up all night and then sleeping until like eleven o'clock and then getting up. The mind somehow is fresher, and the environment is much calmer in the morning, better for meditation. And get yourself on some kind of even schedule of sleeping, so that it's not four hours one night, and ten hours another night, and back and forth and in and out. If you can, be on some basic sort of general schedule.

Dullness

And then dullness is when you're meditating and you're not sleeping, but the mind is definitely getting heavy. When the mind gets heavy, the clarity of the mind really goes down. It's like when you visualize the Buddha, when your mind is really alert, the colors and everything just seems bright and vivid, you have some kind of buoyant feeling in your mind when you're meditating. When it's heavy, it's like everything is collapsing inward. So here, the antidote is to think about something that is positive that will uplift your mind. Think about the Buddha nature, think about the qualities of the Triple Gem, think about the Precious Human Life and our fortune in receiving one, the advantages of it. Something that will uplift the mind and dispel the dullness.

[In response to audience question: what if you're meditating and you realize you're falling asleep?] Then it's better to say, "I'm falling asleep," and get yourself upright again. If you're doing Vipassana type of meditation, you can sometimes watch as your mind is getting drowsier and drowsier. But then the thing is, usually, at some point we just join in and fall asleep with it. If you can watch it straight through, that's fine.

Usually, when you're developing concentration, you want to stay on the object of concentration. So if you're trying to meditate on the breath, and instead you start watching how your mind starts doing these fanciful things as you're falling asleep, you're off your object of meditation. If your object of meditation is the visual image of the Buddha, and instead you start following these other things, you're off your object. So it's better to wake the mind up and go back to your object of meditation. When you lie down to go to sleep, then, do what you're talking about. Then watch it as you're falling

asleep. Ok? When you're dreaming, if you can be aware that you're dreaming, that's good. That's providing some awareness. But it also depends on what you do with that awareness.

4th obscuration: desire for the five sense objects

Then the next one is desire for the five sense objects. Attachment to the five sense objects. So we're sitting and meditating, and then, "I want something to eat. I want to listen to nice music. I want something soft to touch. I want to be with somebody nice to hug. I want to see something pretty. I want to go somewhere." You know, this mind that's just craving sense stimulation. And I think this is something that's quite difficult for us to free ourselves from, because the culture around us is overly sense stimulating. And that's why I keep on saying be really careful of your relationship to the media, because the media is one of the main things that give us too much sense stimulation, so that when we sit down to meditate, it just keeps on pouring in. Be careful what you do during break-time, in between your meditation sessions. Because it's not like meditation sessions and break-times are unrelated things. What you do in your break-times influence your meditation sessions. If you're chasing after all sorts of things of attachment during the break time. when you sit down and meditate, there they are again. We can see that very easily. We talk to somebody. We sit down to meditate. what's going through our mind? -- conversation we just had with somebody; what they talked with us about: our image -- "Did I say the right thing? Did I say the wrong thing? Are they mad at me? Do they think I'm nice?" -- all these kinds of stuff.

So what we do in the break time really influences our meditation session. So again we're coming back to this thing of simplifying our life. Not going into asceticism, but just basically simplifying our life. Getting rid of the things that really aren't necessary. Makes life much easier.

5th obscuration: doubt

And then the last of the five obscurations is doubt. They say it's like a two-pointed needle. You can't sew with a two-pointed needle, because you start to go this way and it jams. And you start to go that way and it jams. So doubt is like that. Doubt is saying, "This meditation technique doesn't work. Maybe I shouldn't be doing this meditation. Maybe I should go to the Zen master and do Zen meditation. Maybe I should go and do Vipassana meditation. Maybe instead of meditating on the Buddha, I should meditate on the breath. Maybe instead of meditating on the breath, I should meditate on loving-kindness. Maybe instead of doing Death meditation, I should meditate on Precious Human Rebirth. Maybe instead of this, I should meditate on Emptiness." You know this mind of doubt. I see some nodding heads. (laughter)

Genuine question vs doubt that is restless or cynical

So here with doubt then, try and distinguish the kind of doubt that has a genuine question, versus the doubt that is just restlessness, and the doubt that's just cynical, "Let's pick a hole in the stuff." So if it's a doubt where you have a genuine question, where you're not clear on a meditation technique, then go and ask, or read a book, and try and get some clarity. "Hmm, I'm supposed to be meditating on the Buddha, but actually I wasn't listening very well to the instructions, I'm not sure how to do it," – that's a completely legitimate kind of doubt; you need more information.

If it's the doubt that is restless, then recognize the doubt for what it is so that instead of getting involved in it, you can leave it alone. Recognize it as one of the old videos. And the same thing, if it's the kind of doubt that is cynical: "Let's attack. Let's pick holes in things," recognize that as an obscuration. Because very often, doubt comes in our mind, and instead of recognizing it as doubt – here I'm talking about a deluded kind of doubt, not the other kind of doubt -- we start to take it seriously. "Gee, maybe I shouldn't be meditating on the image of the Buddha. Maybe I really ought to meditate on the breath. Everybody else is doing that. Oh gee, no, I've been doing it on my nostrils, maybe I should shift it to my abdomen. I've been doing it on my abdomen, maybe I should shift it to my nostril. Maybe I should meditate on loving-kindness instead. Maybe I should do my breath and loving-kindness together. Maybe I can do that and put a little emptiness... I'll meditate on love when I'm breathing in and emptiness when I'm breathing out...(laughter)" So this kind of doubt is negative.

Advice on Meditation Practices

One thing I think is really good, is that people in their daily practice can do the prayers that we do here. And then maybe either some breathing meditation or some concentration meditation on the figure of the Buddha, and then do some of the checking meditation on the subjects that we have gone through, either by following the Lam Rim outline, or looking at your notes. When you take notes, this is not just to fill up your notebook. It's to try and get the main points of it, and make yourself an outline. Think of those points. And think of them in relationship to your own life. And then you cycle through the Lam Rim in this way. Or what you can do is pay special attention to the subjects we're covering in class and really think about those because they're fresh in your mind.

Meditating on a particular topic over a period of time

[In response to audience question] You mean like meditate on death over a period of time? Yeah, that can be very helpful. If you choose to do something like that, then try and read this prayer, "The Foundation of All Good Qualities", because that cycles through the Lam Rim and gives you an overview of it. And then you can zero in on the particular subject that you're going to spend more time on. And it can be very beneficial. Like if you meditate on Death everyday for a week, or Precious Human Life everyday for a week, it's very good. You'll really start to see some change then.

But, let's say you're trying to meditate on Precious Human Life, and then you get this huge incredible thing of anger. Then you obviously have to switch to a different kind of meditation to calm your anger down. You don't have to put your mind in a straight jacket, because you can be quite creative. You think about one topic and it might lead you to another topic, but you do that with awareness instead of just dancing all over the place.

Meditation on the Buddha

Can the Buddha sometimes be serious, and sometimes be smiling? I think they say try and get it on so it's basically the same. I'm sure it has some malleability to it. But you don't want the Buddha to be grossly different from one meditation session to the next. And there might be one part of the Buddha's body too, that really appeals to you more. It may be that you really like the Buddha's eyes, so if your mind starts getting playful and dancing, and Buddha's doing all these things, then go for the eyes, and kind of sink yourself into that again, back to some part of the Buddha's form that really appeals to you.

[In response to audience question] You mean you're visualizing and you're just feeling pleasure because the visualization is beautiful? So the image is very beautiful but you forgot that you're meditating on the Buddha and the Buddha's qualities. Then remind yourself, "Oh yeah, that's very beautiful. That symbolizes his awareness, the merits he's accumulated over these countless eons. And so on..." There're some teachings on the physical attributes of the Buddha – the thirty-two signs and the eighty marks. And those all are symbolic of different things. And it might help you to know those, because then if your mind starts getting caught up with the aesthetics of something, you can remember exactly what it's symbolic of.

Auxiliary Vow 26: (To Abandon) Seeing the Good Qualities of the Taste of Meditative Stabilization and Becoming Attached to It

Then, number 26 is seeing the good qualities of the taste of meditative stabilization and becoming attached to it. So it's like at a certain point, as you're developing calm abiding and meditative stabilization, you get tremendous feelings of bliss (so they say, I've never experienced it.) But they say, they really experience the bliss. And it's very easy to get attached to those, and just want to do the meditation because you feel so blissful. This can actually become a hindrance, because then what your mind is doing is, it's back to the motivation of attachment, isn't it? Except here it's attachment to the bliss of meditation instead of attachment to chocolate cake. It's getting stuck in that bliss.

You may go to some Buddhist teachings and immediately they start you off doing calm-abiding meditation, concentration meditation. So some people may find it strange that when you come to a Tibetan teaching, they talk about Four Noble Truths, they talk about the six defects of samsara, they

talk about the two mental factors and they talk about this, and they talk about that... I remember sometimes in Dharamsala, those people would raise their hands and then ask Genla. "Genla, we want to learn to concentrate." I think the Tibetan masters, by and large, ease us into it really gently, and make sure we have a really good, firm foundation of the whole Buddhist view of life. Because if you have that whole firm foundation, then if you get concentration, you're not going to get stuck in seeking the bliss of the concentration. If you don't understand the Four Noble Truths and the Defects of Cyclic Existence, if you don't know anything about the Determination to be Free, even though you can make your mind very concentrated, then it's real tempting for the mind to get stuck there, because you don't know anything about cyclic existence and getting yourself out, or any of this stuff.

I think it is good to meditate and we definitely should do that. But instead of having a goal like, "I want to escape my life. I want to meditate," try and see, "I want to become a healthy human being. I want to become a whole human being, so that I can function well. And part of my functioning well is meditating and developing concentration. But that's not all of it."

If you're stuck in just being attached to the bliss of the meditation, you're never going to go on to really develop that wisdom aspect of the meditation. And it's the wisdom that actually frees you. Like a lot of the Hindus, they have very similar methods to the ones the Buddhists employ for developing single-pointed concentration, but then what's missing there is the wisdom aspect.

Elaboration on the "bliss" of meditation: enjoy it but don't cling to it

I've yet to experience the bliss, but they did say that when you get very concentrated, physically, your body becomes very supple, and your mind becomes very supple, and your winds get purified, so there comes a very delighted feeling. And also when you can think of it, why is it we're often so unhappy? It's because the mind is going in all directions. If you can get the mind on one subject, especially the Buddha, and he's there and he's so beautiful, then you can get the blissful feeling from that. The concentration brings the bliss.

Bliss here just means a pleasant sensation. We're not talking about the bliss of Enlightenment. And it's not to say that every time you experience bliss, you got to get uptight. You can enjoy the bliss, but just not cling to it.

Do enjoy it because it does make your mind buoyant, and make your mind want to meditate. It's when you say, "Ok, I just want to experience the bliss, and forget about all the other aspects of meditation." That's an obstacle.

Auxiliary Vows 27 - 30: To Eliminate Obstacles to the Far-reaching Attitude of Wisdom

Ok, then, the next set are obstacles to the far-reaching attitude of wisdom. So "wisdom" here can refer to the wisdom realizing emptiness, or reality. It can also refer to wisdom in terms of understanding cause and effect, what to practice, what to abandon, or wisdom understanding just the relative nature and functioning characteristics of phenomena. So we need, again, to develop lots of different kinds of wisdom.

Auxiliary Vow 27: (To Abandon) Abandoning the Scriptures or Paths of the Theravada as Unnecessary for One Following the Mahayana

Here, one obstacle is we should abandon abandoning the scriptures or paths of the Theravada. (it's sometimes called Hinayana) as unnecessary for one following the Mahayana. So if people say, "I'm practicing Mahayana. I don't need to learn all those kinds of meditations that they do in the Theravada because Mahayana is a more expansive practice, this is all I need to know." That's incorrect because all the Mahayana practices are based on the Theravada practice, so we do need to know the Theravada practice. The only thing that we don't want to actualize in that, is simply the determination to free ourselves from cyclic existence without bringing everybody else into that. But all those meditations, all those teachings, they're all very much things that we need to learn. Especially in the Theravada teachings, there's so much talk about refuge, ethics, precepts, concentration, determination to be free, sufferings of samsara, four noble truths. These are teachings that are completely common to all the Buddhist traditions.

So we need to learn them for our own practice. We also need to learn them so that we can benefit others. Because at some point in time, we can become great Bodhisattvas. When you're a Bodhisattva, you have to really be able to try and help everybody, no matter what their disposition or interest or tendency is. So for those people who come to you, who have the kind of disposition or interest or tendency towards those meditations, you need to know those meditations so that you can teach them to that person. So the Bodhisattva practice is really wide and inclusive. You try and learn everything, even though it may not be your central practice, so that when you meet others whom it might benefit, you can teach it to them.

Now, for us, how to apply that, what does that mean for us? Does that mean that we should start grabbing any practice, right, left and center? No, we're going to get confused. We need to stay on the course and build up the foundation of the Lam Rim and have our path clear. But the more capable we get and the more firm we are in our practice, then the more we can start expanding and including all these other things. Sometimes the lamas give these whole sets of tantric initiations, they'll give a hundred or two hundred initiations. Now, maybe at our level it's more important to take one or two and practice those intensely and gain realizations rather than jump back and forth and back and forth. But when you have a lot of capacity and a lot of training and you're really in a position to help others, then it's very useful to have those other initiations, because then you can pass them on to the people who can practice them according to their tendency.

Auxiliary Vow 28: (To Abandon) Exerting Effort Principally in Another System of Practice while Neglecting the One One Already Has, the Mahayana

Then number 28 is exerting effort principally in another system of practice while neglecting the one one already has, the Mahayana. Whereas number 27 was you're kind of forgetting the Theravada because you're practicing Mahayana, this one is just the opposite. You're forgetting the Mahayana, and making your principal practice something else. So what this vow is trying to get us to do is to help us remain centered on the Mahayana practice, which is based on the Theravada practice, and to always have this attitude of becoming a Buddha for the benefit of others. We might learn many different systems of practice, but to really remain centered on the Mahayana and bring what we learn from the other things into that.

Auxiliary Vow 29: (To Abandon) Without a Good Reason, Exerting Effort to Learn or Practice the Treatises of Non-Buddhists which are Not Proper Objects of One's Endeavor

Then, number 29: Without a good reason, exerting effort to learn or practice the treatises of non-Buddhists which are not proper objects of one's endeavor. It is possible to read texts and treatises of non-Buddhists, that's completely ok. And in fact, it can be very, very good to do. But what this is saying, is without a good reason, just doing that. Like, you take one of the monks of the monasteries in India, who's going through all the perfection of the wisdom sutras, and he says, "Oh, this is really boring. I think I want to learn New Age philosophy instead." And then he just starts reading New Age philosophy, and neglects the Buddha's teachings. That's a problem. Reading New Age philosophy, or reading some other philosophical system, or reading things on psychology, these things can be really good and really beneficial in our practice, but what this vow is saying, is when we neglect our practice to study those things. Or we study those things without a good reason.

The basic idea when you're trying to develop wisdom, and you study other things which are not specifically Buddhist texts, is to learn from them what is valid and incorporate that, and that helps to enrich our understanding of Buddhism. The idea is also to be able to detect in those writings the false premises and the wrong conclusions and then really using your intelligence and your wisdom to refute them.

So let's say as a Buddhist, we might want to read some Christian text at some time. Completely ok. And sometimes maybe you read the biography of a Saint and you see all the stuff that they went through, how much perseverance they practice with, and it can be very inspiring because that's very similar to our practice and the whole thing of enthusiastic perseverance, and if that can help you, great. When you read the Christian stuff, you can take from it the things that are really helpful, maybe some of the teachings on patience that Jesus taught -- very, very good. Or you read the Torah, the Jewish scriptures, and you think about all the things on ethics -- incredibly stimulating. But when you

start to just read all sorts of Christian stuff and forget about Buddhism, then that's going to the other extreme.

Another purpose for reading those scriptures is to be able to see where the flaws in the reasoning are. Because we want to really strengthen our wisdom so that we can think very, very clearly. And one way to do that is to really think deeply about different philosophical tenets, and what is true and what isn't true. And so you might read something that's Christian and they talk about God creating the earth and then you think about that – is that true, is that not true? And well, if that were true, then how come this, and how come that, and you start, with the reasoning, to see the flaws in that way of thinking. Or you read something and they talk about a permanent soul, something that is "me". And you begin to think about that. You can see the pitfalls in that. Then that's very, very helpful for your growth of wisdom.

So reading things that are not specifically Buddhist can be helpful in both those two respects, in terms of using what is beneficial, and also in terms of refuting the wrong conceptions. But if we read those things without a good reason, and neglect our practice, and start to study those things, that's not beneficial.

Auxiliary Vow 30: (To Abandon) Beginning to Favour and Take Delight in the Treatises of Non-Buddhists although Studying Them for a Good Reason

And vow number 30 is: Beginning to favor and take delight in the treatises of non-Buddhists although studying them for a good reason. So here, you're studying them for a good reason but you begin to like them too much. "Oh gee, maybe God did create the world. Oh gee, maybe there is a permanent self. Oh gee, maybe the path to salvation is just to open myself to the saving grace of Jesus or Mohammed or something like this." So we're beginning to favor those things.

My personal feeling is, the purpose of this vow, is so that we recognize what we're doing, so that if we start to favor that kind of thing, a little bell goes off in our mind, and says, "Oh! What am I doing here? Am I really thinking clearly about this material. or am I just getting enchanted by the flowery language and the beautiful context?" It's not saying that you're bad because you might believe those things. you might give things that space in your mind. It's not saying, "That's outside of Buddhist teachings, you can't believe that." We're not saying that. But what this is, is just be aware of what we're thinking. Here, maybe you've been hearing all these teachings about selflessness, and it makes sense to you all along, and then maybe you start studying something from another tradition, and you find yourself starting to think. "Oh well, maybe there is a permanent soul that goes from life to life, or a permanent soul that gets reborn in heaven." And this vow is going to make you say, "Hmm, that's interesting. I'm beginning to believe that. Why? What is it that I find so attractive in that view? Is that view really logical?" I see it much more as a reminder to us to be aware of what we're thinking, so that we don't just kind of trip along, getting enchanted by one idea, and another idea, because it sounds good. Is that making some sense to you?

I remember a lot of the philosophical studies are refuting all these wrong ideas of other schools. One time, we asked one of my teachers. "We're refuting all these ideas. How come?" And he said. "Well, I'm sure if one of the teachers of these ideas came here and taught you, you guys would all believe him!" (laughter) He says actually when we look at it, our discriminating wisdom is not that astute, and we're pretty gullible and we're very likely to believe anybody who can come and suggest anything that sounds good. So you see that part of yourself, when somebody says something that sounds good, you'll say, "I believe. I'll enlist."

So you have to really think deeply about those things, so that you don't just follow along because that's something that sounds sweet. Lots of times at talks, people will ask me questions, and they'll have some kind of language. Or some of the talks that other people give, the New Age things, the light and love, and those stuff.. the language sounds great, but it's like, I don't understand what they're talking about? And if you really have a critical mind, "What do you mean by light? What do you mean by love?" The big saying is, "It's all one." Sounds great, doesn't it? We love it: "It's all one." It's fantastic, we believe it; I bow down to "It's all one". What in the world does that mean? All these people who go around saying "It's all one." Does that mean you two people are the same people? Does that mean the cat is the dog? Does that mean the cat is the chocolate cake; I can eat the cat and not the chocolate cake? What are we talking about here? Sounds great, but what do we mean?

So with wisdom, we're really trying to develop that acute mind, that sharp mind that can analyze, figure out what exists and what doesn't. Instead of just being led away by those stuff.

The Value of Debate

[In response to audience question] With debating, what they do is, very often, in the text they'll bring up these different wrong ideas, and the monks and nuns would debate them. And in the middle you might find that you really believe in some of these wrong ideas. And so you're sitting there really defending these ideas, because you think for sure, the Buddha's wrong here, Lama Tsong Khapa is wrong, and you're all behind the outsiders. And that's the value of debate, because when you debate it, you start seeing where your reasoning is off-base. Or, if you can prove it, then fine, great. In ancient India, this is what they did. They have this big debating contest. If the other guy won, you convert to his belief. So this is really the value of debating, so that we bring up all these ideas, and instead of saying, "Oh, that's not Buddhist, I don't believe in it," we bring it up, look at it, and figure out if it's true or not true.

Sometimes you're debating points from non-Buddhist scriptures, sometimes you're debating points from Buddhist scriptures of the lower philosophical schools. His Holiness said that the monks should learn more about science and Western philosophy and begin to debate that.

Science is something that's developing. Those principles of science that can really be sustained, we find that they usually correspond very much with what Buddha said. And then those things from science which from year to year are changing (though the scientists are sure it's true this time), you don't want to put all your eggs in one basket.

I think even with the scientists, when I talk with my friends who are scientists, they very much have this idea, "Actually, we don't know very much. And this is kind of a scenario that looks good for right now." It's the public, or the scientists, when they're talking to lay people, who go, "These things are true." But when you find scientists talking among themselves, they always say, "Actually we don't really understand this."

These vows are not to entrench us in the Mahayana camp which we've got to defend at all costs and not let any single doubt enter our mind. Because the whole spirit of the Buddha's teachings is investigation and inquiry.