

Traveling from Confusion to Original Sanity
Introduction to Buddhism 111

The Nalandabodhi Study Curriculum (2008)
Under the direction of the Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche

Traveling from Confusion to Original Sanity
Introduction to Buddhism 111
The Nalandabodhi Study Curriculum (2008)
Under the direction of the Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche

Class 1: “The Path is the Goal”

Ground

- Buddha nature as the fundamental basis for meditation and the entire path
- The “re-discovery” of our innate wisdom mind

Path

- View, meditation, and action
- Non-distraction as the way to cut through habits
- Importance of study/analysis and experience

Fruition

- Various perspectives for transforming neurosis into wisdom
- Three styles of traveling
- The role of the guide in each one
- Common goal of all Buddhist approaches: return to our natural state of wakefulness

Ground: Rediscovering our Wisdom Heart

The basic purpose of doing meditation practice is to develop greater mindfulness and awareness and, through this, to discover (or rather re-discover) our basic wisdom in order to transcend our conflicting emotions. The reason we say “re-discover” is that this wisdom is already there. It already exists as a part of our mind, as the very nature of our mind. It is not something new that we are learning from this spiritual journey. Therefore, on this meditation path, we try to develop the ultimate realization through developing greater mindfulness and awareness. We try to go beyond just the mental chatter on the surface of our mind and get to know its deeper levels. Gradually, we familiarize ourselves with the full scope of our mind so that we finally realize its ultimate nature. In the Buddhist view, the ultimate nature of our mind is the nature of a Buddha’s wisdom, a Buddha’s heart. The nature of our mind is always enlightened, always awakened. It is vital to have firm confidence that the basic nature of our own mind has the same nature as the wisdom of a Buddha. With that confidence, we familiarize ourselves with the nature of our mind in order to directly and fully experience it.

What is the nature of our mind? The basic state of our mind is pure and free from all kinds of bondage and hang-ups that tie us down right now. It is an open, spacious, and relaxed awareness, a vivid experience of being wide awake without center or fringe, as boundless as the sky, without any trace of confusion or pain. Though there is nothing to hold onto in this luminous vast expanse, it is pervaded by unconditioned wisdom, compassion, and joy. This fundamental ground is the true nature of all living beings from the very start of their existence.

Buddhism does not speak about primordial sin, but rather about our primordial purity and goodness free from all evil and the self-centered views of ego.

This state of mind being free from all the unnecessary garbage with which we usually weigh ourselves down is often compared to a precious shining jewel that has fallen into a very dirty place, perhaps something like a medieval toilet. Though this precious jewel may be completely covered by temporary filth and garbage, its pure and radiant nature will never change, regardless of whether it is encrusted by many layers of dirt or whether it is purified. Likewise, the full wisdom and all the qualities of a Buddha are ever-present within the nature of the mind of each sentient being, be it a human or a mosquito. Just like this gem, the nature of our basic wisdom mind has never been stained or obscured in the slightest, no matter how much confusion, hatred, greed, pride, or jealousy we may have acted out and piled up within it. Nevertheless, due to our narrow perspective of clinging to our ego, to our precious emotions, and to our rigid belief systems about ourselves and the world, we do not experience the relaxed state of letting our mind be what it really is. Rather, we are carried away by the superficial waves of our self-oriented feelings, thoughts, and pursuits. Since we have been carried away for a very long time, we have accumulated tons of emotional and conceptual habitual garbage and are completely wrapped up in it. Therefore, just as we would mistake a jewel wrapped in many layers of filth for being just a lump of dirt, we do not recognize our true face. We are likely to find it difficult to identify even the layers that obscure it, not to mention the jewel itself.

Because we have spun ourselves into a very intricate and thick cocoon with its snugly feeling of constantly fooling ourselves about who or what we truly are, we cannot even conceive of what our true nature is, let alone perceive it clearly and directly. The starting point where we fix the first thread of this cocoon is called “me” and is the center of our world. From there, we keep spinning our threads to include “others.” We crisscross many times between these two points, self and other, solidifying our world through subject, object, inside, outside, good, bad, and so on. Finally, we convince ourselves of the true existence of our magnificent cocoon to such a degree that we feel it is the most natural thing in the world. We cling to it for dear life believing it is who we are. We have completely lost track of where we started our threads as well as the fact that this construction is entirely homespun. We become attracted to those threads that seem to affirm and comfort us, and feel aversion toward those who seem to be threatening and unpleasant. As a result, we respond to these feelings of comfort and aversion by trying to obtain or keep what we like and avoid or get rid of what we don't like. This behavior results in our experience of various kinds of fleeting happiness and suffering.

If we cannot even see the layers of our cocoon clearly, how can we have strong confidence that there is a jewel buried within? Suppose someone were to hand us a stone that is covered with layer upon layer of earth, mud, and dust, saying, “This is a diamond, do you want to buy it?” Would we be willing to pay what a diamond is worth? Would we only be willing to pay what the layers are worth? Or would we just scoff at this whole offer? It would be a very critical decision, which is precisely the kind of challenge that we face when someone says to us, “The nature of our mind is fully awakened and pure.”

Since the space-like nature of awareness has nothing to hold onto and is unlike a “thing” with clear dimensions, such as a chair right in front of our eyes, the buddhas cannot simply point at it

and say, “Look, there it is!” It is almost impossible to directly demonstrate it. Consider how difficult it is to exactly pinpoint even a single ordinary thought or emotion in our mind. That is why the Buddha pointed out our mind’s true state through many examples, such as space. Another example of our mind’s true nature is the sun. It is always present and shining in the sky, no matter how it may look to us from being on the earth. If it is gray and rainy for days, we might even completely forget about the sun or how it feels to have a nice walk on a bright sunny day. Of course this does not mean that the sun is actually gone or doesn’t shine anymore. No matter how dense the clouds may be, there is no way they could ever affect the sun itself. In fact, even the dimmest little light on a dark winter day comes from nowhere but the sun. Likewise, the luminous and spacious awareness of mind’s nature is always shining in our hearts. The only reason we do not experience its full radiance, warmth, and clarity is that it is covered by the dense clouds of ego-clinging and the continuous rainfall of accumulated mental garbage.

Therefore, in order to get in touch with our true heart, we first need to recognize what covers it. Then we gradually peel away the layers of our cozy cocoon and eliminate the addiction to inflicting our own pain. Eventually, we will realize that the oblique black-and-whiteness of our ordinary thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, which we think are so colorful and vivid, are actually based on the bright sunshine of our Buddha heart, which has been dimmed down and obscured by the clouds of ignorance around it. Moreover, all our experiences of genuine love, compassion, wisdom, and mental calm are just expressions of our true nature shining through. What is called the “path” is to discriminate between the clouds and the sun. Then the clouds will evaporate and we can familiarize ourselves with the sun. Fundamentally, this means that we do not go anywhere. Rather we try to naturally gravitate from blindly spinning around the outer reaches of the cosmos of our mind toward its actual center.

Path: The Journey Happens Within

To become familiar with our mind means to introduce ourselves to our own mind. For our whole life, we have not known our own mind because we have always been looking outward, never looking inward. The only time we look at ourselves is in the mirror, but that is also looking outward. The path is actually introducing us to our minds so that we get to know ourselves better in a deeper and more subtle way, to know how our mind functions, how our thoughts function, what emotions are arising, and how we skillfully deal with them. The best way to know ourselves in the most basic and vast sense, that is, to recognize our own minds and overcome the conflicting emotions that distort its natural face, is by exploring without fear. To keep exploring further and further, to have this inquisitive mind looking for answers about ourselves is very important. Buddha said that you can find plenty of answers in the scriptures and on spiritual journeys, but the true answer is within you, not somewhere outside.

In other words, Buddha said very clearly that he cannot purify our negativities, our suffering, and the causes of this suffering; nor can other Buddhas purify all of this. Likewise, the Buddhas cannot transfer their realization, their attainment of enlightenment, or their wakefulness to others. No matter how compassionate they are, they cannot transfer it, they cannot hand it over to us. They have no power to do that. Thus, the Buddha asked himself, “What is the point of teaching? What am I doing here, if that is the case?” The answer to this is, “I can only show you the path.” This means that the Buddha shows us the same path through which he achieved the basic

wakefulness and liberation that is called “enlightenment,” through which he achieved freedom from pain, suffering, and the causes of suffering. Buddha is the perfect example of a human being achieving that highest state of consciousness, having unfolded the vast innate potential of our minds to its fullest degree. He said, “I am a human being, I was full of suffering and pain, I went through all the troubles that you are going through. Through the spiritual journey I achieved the state of enlightenment, freedom from pain and the causes of pain. And you can do it as well. I can show you the path that leads to that state, but it is totally up to you. How you get it, how quickly, how well you do it, it all depends on you.” This message of the Buddha is very clear. There is no godlike Buddha out there who controls our path, our path is totally up to us.

When we start on this path, we may think that the ultimate ground of our mind’s true state is unconnected to our ordinary reality, that is, our conventional unquestioned experience of ourselves and the world. However, in order to approach and realize ultimate reality, we need to fully understand relative reality. We cannot simply say, “I have had enough of my ordinary world or concepts, upsetting emotions, and suffering; I am ready to jump into my true nature.” No matter how many enthusiastic descriptions of the breathtaking view from the top of Mount Everest we may hear from others, no matter how much we wish to be up there, there is no way to enjoy that view unless we know and properly use the means to climb this mountain. In other words, properly understanding and then seeing through the confusion in our relative reality is the means to see ultimate reality.

Thus, the starting point of the Buddhist path consists of becoming familiar with these two levels of reality: what seems to be the case in the world as we know it, and how things actually are. The main approach here is to let go of our tendency of constantly affirming and fortifying our existence, experiences, and opinions. Instead we try to take a closer look at what is actually going on in our minds, and where and how we fool ourselves and others. This entails analyzing what we take to be real, solid, and true, just as modern physicists analyze what our world is made of. They speak of quantum mechanics, quarks, and a host of other ever tinier particles, waves, energies, or strings. Most stop short of saying, “There isn’t really anything we can find,” since that would mean the end of the world. When we hear that our world is at least made up of *something*, such as infinitely small particles, even if we can never perceive them, we can hold onto that something and feel relieved, because it seems to show that we and the world are not completely empty or nonexistent. In this way, we can continue to think that we *do* exist, even if we are not quite sure *how* we exist.

This is why even most of these modern scientists, who through their experiments should know better, basically ignore their own findings as soon as they step out of their labs: because it is way too threatening to be constantly aware of everything being just empty space with maybe a few imperceptible dust motes swirling around here and there. According to quantum physics, there are no such things as solid matter, roads, cars, or bodies, so who or what is driving home after an exciting day in one of those giant particle crushers? Subjectively, we do not live our lives by behaving as quantum fields or the like. We do not live on quarks or pure energy, but treat ourselves to burgers and drink coffee. So what is the practical or experiential outcome of these investigations? Do they actually change the way we see ourselves and the world, do they lead to

less mental and physical suffering, do they make us “better persons” who treat ourselves and others in more compassionate and skillful ways?

View, Meditation, and Action

From a Buddhist point of view, whether we analyze the outer physical world or the inner world of our minds, we neither find any solid or inherent existence, nor do we stop our investigation at some point for our egos to still feel safe, but we keep venturing into the big wide open. Then we can see that the ground or the basic view is groundlessness, everything keeps changing moment by moment and nothing is what it seems to be. In order for this to affect our habitual fixed patterns for dealing with the world and eventually gain a broader outlook that informs our actions, we need to progressively familiarize ourselves with this basic state of affairs and, unlike said scientists, make it a living experience. In other words, Buddhism is all about integrating the results of our analysis of the seeming existence of the world into our daily experience so as to affect our habitual fixed patterns of dealing with our lives and eventually gain a wider outlook that serves to inform our actions in a way that is beneficial for both ourselves and others. In other words, analyzing the problems in our life and recognizing them for what they are, identifying the causes for these problems, and then learning about and applying the proper remedies are what make up the Buddhist path.

However, we also need to make a clear distinction between the two levels of reality, relative (or seeming) and ultimate. When Buddhists speak about “groundlessness” or “emptiness,” they speak from the point of view of ultimate reality. But when they speak about relative experiences and appearances, they speak of interdependent origination in terms of an infinite web of interacting causes and conditions. It is one of the most common and at the same time detrimental mistakes to confuse and/or mix these two levels. This is the source for many misunderstandings about what the Buddha taught. In other words, one cannot play the two realities against each other, such as saying, “There are no good or bad actions, because nothing really exists,” or “Things and beings must exist, because there is cause and effect.” This is just as a person with clear eyesight cannot deny what someone with cataracts sees, and vice versa. As long as our dualistic experiences are grounded in relative reality with its poles of happiness and suffering, good and bad, and so on, we cannot simply deny all of it by declaring it to be actually nonexistent. Rather we need to play by the rules of relative reality and gather the causes that bring happiness and avoid those that lead to pain, respectively. At the same time, in order to go beyond these conditioned experiences, we need to gain a broader perspective of the ultimate nature of what we experience as happiness, suffering, causes, and results.

Our practice includes not only an analysis of the outer world but of our own person. Who or what are we really? Our ego has been with us for a very long time, like an old friend. The relationship is so intimate that ego has almost become one with our own heart. Therefore, it is very difficult to separate from this old friend, even if we see that it causes all our troubles. Our natural impulse is to continue snuggling up with ego and there is tremendous resistance to letting go of it. At the same time, another side of our mind starts to see how dishonest this “friend” has been and how we have been cheated all along. We see that there is no benefit whatsoever in hanging on to this relationship with our ego; we have gained no peace or happiness, but only troubles and suffering. In brief, the reason the Buddha recommends analyzing our ego is not just

in order to perform some kind of sophisticated philosophical exercise, but because our ego-clinging is the source of all our problems and suffering.

However, we find ourselves having split feelings. Discovering the truth about our ego, that it does not even exist but constantly tricks us, is very bad news for this ego, and it does not want to hear about it at all. Confronting ego is like confronting a friend with the discovery of dishonesty in our relationship. Our friend's first reaction is to ignore this truth and our own reaction is to try to forget about it, because we still feel somewhat good about this relationship and have a sense of commitment, which ties us down again and again. No matter how often or how deeply we recognize the truth that there is no ego and that it just harms us, we have this persistent habit of going back to clinging to it. Thus, the first step in discovering the wisdom of egolessness is to let go of clinging to, rejecting, or ignoring our ego, but to acknowledge that the nature of our self-clinging itself is selflessness. The very nature of the objects of our clinging, to ourselves and things as existent, is unfindable and empty. It is in fact nothing but a bad, yet very old and ingrained, habitual tendency of hanging on to some fixed idea that something that does not exist really exists. The courage to face this habit and our resistance to let go of it again and again is the first wisdom that we discover on the path.

To really understand the nonexistence of our ego and thus gradually let go of it requires investigating the details of what exactly this supposedly existing self of ours could be and where among all the constituents of our body or mind it could be located. Thus, the path consists of studying and analyzing these issues in order to acknowledge ego's utter unfindability and to realize that this is not a loss, but is the essence of freedom. It is not being bossed around by our fundamentally mistaken outlook, but giving the true nature of mind the space it needs to be itself. Meditation means to familiarize ourselves, on ever more profound levels, with both the lack of ego and the richness of our mind as it is by itself. How we act, speak, and think in between studying, reflecting, and meditating will gradually become more and more thoroughly imbued with the insights gained during the more formal elements of the path.

Study and Experience

From the Buddhist point of view, discovering the true nature of our mind is possible only by means of two essential processes. The first is the process of study and analysis. Buddha said that it is most important to contemplate the meaning of the teachings, thoroughly analyze them, and submit them to logical reasoning before accepting anything. Buddha taught an extensive theory, philosophy, and logic, which we study and analyze, and through which we find the true nature of our ordinary lives, suffering and impermanence. If we explore this suffering further, then we find that there actually is no suffering. Instead, we find peace. However, first we must thoroughly undergo this process of analysis and exploration. Because this intellectual aspect is so strongly emphasized, the path of Buddhism is known as the path of wisdom or the path of knowledge.

The second most essential process is meditative experience. Analysis is important, but through analysis alone we cannot experience the truth. The only way we can truly experience the nature of mind is through meditative contemplation. Meditation is simply further exploring the nature

of our suffering, our pain, the causes of our suffering, our joy, our happiness, the full range of our experiences and emotions. Through the meditative path we experience the nature of mind without words, without concepts, without labels; we simply experience it and watch it. We do this in the same way that we might experience a Snickers bar. When we take the first bite of our Snickers bar, we experience it truly, very directly, but we cannot describe how it tastes. We cannot truly express the taste in any words or concepts whatsoever. We may say it is “sweet,” but that alone does not express the taste. Is it like a spoonful of sugar in your mouth? No, it is not. Or we can say it is “milky.” Is it like drinking a glass of milk. No, it is not like that. Is it like the taste of butter, or cheese, or other milk products? No, it is not like that either. So both “sweet” and “milky” are very vague. Even if we say that it has caramel and peanuts in it, that is still not saying anything. What we are reaching here is the true experience of being beyond words.

This is what the experience coming from meditation is like. Eating is like meditation in terms of the directness of the experience, which is incomparable and basically inexpressible. However, even if we have, for example, eaten spaghetti once, this is still only one experience of eating this food. But when we have been eating spaghetti for many years in many places, authentic restaurants, bad restaurants, good cooking, and bad cooking, then we will have had the full experience. We will not only know how spaghetti tastes, but we can differentiate between genuine spaghetti and spaghetti that is not genuine. This is the full realization of the path of meditation. When we have the full realization, we will not only know for ourselves, but we can tell others how to cook and what the taste of the meal should be like.

In short, the path of spirituality is the basic path that discovers our true nature of mind through two processes. The first is the process of listening, learning, analysis, and examination, and the second is the process of meditation, from which we gain direct experience.

Fruition

According to the Buddhist teachings, enlightenment is right here within our mind’s nature. That nature is what we are trying to discover and connect with. That nature is what we are trying to recognize, to realize, and to perfect. That is the whole journey on this path. The ground is also the path and the fruition.

As far as realizing the nature of our mind, there is nowhere to go, let alone any place outside of it to search. There is nothing new to be attained or realized other than this very nature that has been our own mind since the very beginning. However, as long as this is not recognized there seems to be a path and some outcome of it. There is a story about a group of friends who went to a bar and one of them became very drunk. At the end of the night, his friends dragged him to his home and said, “You are home now, we will put you into your bed.” But the drunk one was so intoxicated that he did not even recognize the door of his own house and started yelling, “This is not my home, I live somewhere else!” His friends tried to convince him that he was home, but he did not believe them and was fighting them with all his might, insisting that he lived somewhere else. Finally, the friends gave up and dragged him around a few blocks until they arrived at his home again, saying, “Now you are home, you were right, *this* is it.” And the drunk one exclaimed, “Yes, this is the right place, I’m home now!” Having been dragged around some

blocks from his home back to his home convinced him that an actual journey to another place, his “true” home, had happened. Likewise, as long as we don’t realize that we are home in our mind’s basic ground all the time, we will embark on a journey to find this ground and then call it “attainment” or “fruition.”

Various Perspectives on Transforming Neurosis into Wisdom

The experience of awakening, of complete enlightenment, can be achieved through many different methods. There is the most foundational and simple Buddhist approach, mainly focused on oneself. Then there is the vast and profound approach, which is greatly altruistic. Finally, there is the indestructible approach of numerous swift and skillful means to awakening. These three methods lead to the same goal. Thus, the difference lies not in the result achieved, but in the time it takes and the methods used to reach the result. Of these three, only the latter is said to possess the methods that can potentially lead to the realization of the true nature of mind in a single lifetime. This way of achieving the state of utter primordial wakefulness is even called attaining “complete enlightenment in one instant.” This means that when we take the instructions to heart, when we employ the methods properly, stage by stage, and when we focus on the path and do not take any sidetracks, then this awakening can take place at any second. One moment we can be a totally confused ordinary sentient being, and the next we can be a completely enlightened being. This outrageous but very realistic notion is known as sudden enlightenment or “wild awakening.”

Devotion and the Teacher

What role does the teacher or spiritual friend play in our journey to find enlightenment? On the one hand, it is said that enlightenment is right there within us, and on the other hand, it is said that there is no enlightenment without devotion to the teacher or the lineage of enlightened masters. It sounds a little bit contradictory.

What do we mean by devotion and why is devotion or trust so important? How exactly does it work? Devotion is a path, a skillful means through which we develop basic trust, trust in our own enlightened heart, trust that our mind is utterly pure, and trust that it has been so right from the beginning. Trusting that is devotion.

The role of the teacher in this context is simply to be a mirror for this basic trust. When we look into a mirror, what is reflected back to us is our own face. The mirror does not reflect itself. It shows us whether our face is clean or dirty, or if we need a haircut. The mirror is unbiased; it reflects positive and negative qualities equally clearly. In the same way, when we look at the teacher with devotion, we see both our positive and negative qualities. We see our failures, our struggles, our disturbing emotions arising, just as we see dirt on our face in an ordinary mirror. At the same time, we see beyond the surface impurities that can simply be washed away. We see our true face, our actual reality, which is the perfectly pure nature of our mind.

What happens, though, if we are sitting in front of the mirror in a room that is dark? The mirror still possesses the potential to reflect, and we still possess all those qualities to be reflected. But if there is no light, we could sit there in the dark for ages and nothing would happen. We would never see anything. Therefore, it is not enough just to sit in front of the mirror. We need to turn on a light, which in this case is the light of devotion. When this light is on, and when the mirror of the teacher is in front of us, then we can see the reflection of the nature of our own mind very clearly and precisely, in a nonconceptual manner. That is the role of the teacher and the lineage in our enlightenment, in our realization of the nature of mind. The teacher is not the creator of our enlightenment. He or she is simply a condition for our attaining our own enlightenment. The mirror neither turns on the light for us, nor does it bring us into the room where it is, nor does it tell us to sit in front of it. It does not say, "Look here!" The mirror is just a mirror occupying a certain space. We have to enter the room, turn on the light, walk towards the mirror, and look into it. So, who is doing the job here? It is us. We are being active in this relationship.

The relationship with the teacher is personal, yet it is beyond the personal. It is so close that we feel like we can control it, yet at the same time we realize it is beyond our control. It is similar to our ordinary relationships in the world, to our spouses, friends, and family, yet it goes beyond these mundane relationships. If we can work with this relationship, it opens a door to working with every relationship in the world and becomes a great vehicle for transforming our negative emotions and suffering.

Some traditions say that we have to be passive to receive divine grace or to have mystical experiences, but here it is the opposite. To invoke the blessing of the lineage we have to be active. Everything is done by us; the teacher is simply a condition, a mirror, which we have chosen to keep in our room. That mirror did not mysteriously land there, but we selected it and placed it there through our own efforts.

The lineage instructions are not the creator of our enlightenment either, but simply another condition. They are powerful and profound tools which, like all tools, need to be employed by someone. Instructions are like directions for getting where we want to go. For example, if we are in a building and wish to leave but are unsure where the exits are, then we ask for directions. If we are lucky, someone will be there who can point out the various ways to go. There may be a way out that can be found but the instructions are a little complicated to follow. About this one, our guide tells us, "First, you go upstairs to the attic, which gets a little dark, but we will find an opening in a wall there, and then we climb through that to another set of stairs that leads down to the basement, and then we walk straight towards the back of that room where there is another set of stairs that goes up one flight to the second floor where we will find the exit." That's one way, the most foundational approach. It takes a little bit of time, but the directions are very concrete and we will find the exit no matter what.

The directions of the vast and profound approach are a little more straightforward. Our guide tells us that there is also another way, "We are to walk through this door right here, and then we will see another set of doors, and we walk through those, and then there is one more set of doors, which we walk through, and then we will be outside in the parking lot, where we have probably parked our car."

The directions of the indestructible approach of many skillful means say that exits are here, there, and everywhere. About these, your guide tells us, “There is a window right here that we can jump through and we will be outside instantly. There are also windows over there, or if we like, there is a side door here that will let us out, there are actually many direct exits right here. We don’t have to look anywhere else. We can choose the exit we want to take based on how quickly we want to get out.”

These directions are like the instructions of the lineage. What do they do? Not much by themselves. We may hear them all the time, instruction after instruction. Even so, the only way we will ever get out of this building is by standing up and walking out with our own two feet, not on the feet of the teacher or the lineage. There is no such thing as “lineage feet” or “teacher’s feet” on which we can walk. We have to be willing to stand up and walk on our own feet. When we can do that we are beginning to find our own exit out of our troubled existence and into the beautiful space of freedom. We are beginning to find the path to enlightenment.

We can see from these examples how the instructions play an important role but are not more important than our selves. We play the more active role on the path. It is we who act upon the instructions. We receive all the information we need to get out of the building, which way is the safest, which way is a little risky, and which way is the fastest but also the most hazardous way. However, if we take no action, then eons from now we will still be wandering around in this same building.

We have the complete choice and the full power to decide the course of our personal journey. This is the Buddhist view. From this perspective, we are the center of the path, and our enlightenment depends on our own individual effort. It is not dependent on anyone or anything outside of us. With the eye of devotion toward the teacher, the lineage, and the instructions, we can see the true nature of mind.

Traveling from Confusion to Original Sanity
Introduction to Buddhism 111
The Nalandabodhi Study Curriculum (2008)
Under the direction of the Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche

Class 2: The Play of Confusion and Sanity (aka “The Four Truths”)

- What’s wrong here? (Suffering)
- How does it go wrong? (Origin)
- Does this ever end? (Cessation)
- How do I make it end? (Path)

Four Basic Facts About Life: Suffering

The Buddha’s first teaching stated that the nature of all conditioned existence as we know it is fundamentally dissatisfying. Furthermore, we are not in control, even though we always think and act as if we are. We may think that we are in control of our lives, having surrounded ourselves with all kinds of pleasant circumstances, a wonderful loving partner, cute children, a great job with abundant stock options, a nice house, lots of time for holidays and entertainment, maybe even an exciting spiritual journey. And then things happen: we have a heart attack, our partner cheats on us, our children take drugs, our company is going bankrupt and our stock is worth nothing, our house needs a new expensive roof, and so on. We learn from the tabloids that all of this happens even to the rich and most famous people, such as actors, politicians, or sports heroes. Even if everything goes well for a while, we may have this subtle feeling that something is wrong here, that we should be happy but are still not satisfied deep down, no matter what we do or experience. In other words, not being in control and being dissatisfied can manifest when we get what we do not want, do not get what we do want, lose what we like, or are unable to rid ourselves of what we do not like.

Many people in the wealthier countries say, “I don’t suffer, I am happy with my life, so what is the Buddha talking about?” They may be in the fortunate position of never having any substantial suffering or problems or any underlying sense of dissatisfaction with their life. So they may not have any idea what the Buddha meant by “suffering” and find this whole message an inaccurate portrayal of life and rather depressing. However, if we look at just human beings on this planet, we recognize that the overwhelming majority of them experience great suffering every day, be it through war, poverty, hunger, sickness, or mental problems. The extent of suffering gets worse when we consider all those animals that are not our cherished and well-kept pets; they constantly harm, kill, and eat each other, suffer from hunger, parasites, heat, and cold.

In terms of how this basic fact of suffering manifests, it comes in three types: the suffering of pain, the suffering of change, and the all-pervasive suffering.

The Suffering of Pain

This first kind of suffering is what we usually understand by suffering, something that is either physically or mentally unpleasant, irritating, or painful is happening to us. This kind of manifest suffering can become a very intense experience. The saying “misfortunes don’t come singly”

describes the more intense forms of the suffering of pain. For example, we may already have a serious illness, and on top of that we become involved in a car accident and break some bones, the doctors fix the fractures badly, we have to go for rehab for many months, and we are in constant pain and discomfort. In addition, we lose our job, our partner leaves us, and even our best friends don't show up anymore. This is a very extreme and intense example of our experiences becoming the suffering of pain.

The Suffering of Change

The suffering of change is when we are pulled out of what we experience as happiness and are faced with the suffering of pain. The classic example of the suffering of change is when you are in the middle of your wedding and the roof of the church collapses. One moment you are enjoying the greatest time of your life, the most important and happiest time of your life, and the next moment the roof falls in on you, and you have a broken back if you are lucky. That is the suffering of change, happiness turning into suffering.

Apart from such dramatic examples, we have a constant fear of any change in our lives that can be manifest or very hidden. Any change we make, a career change for instance, causes great fear because we do not know the future; we fear the unknown. Sometimes there is a rational basis for our fear, and sometimes there is no such basis at all. This fear of the unknown is the more fundamental kind of suffering of change. Our fear exists in every second that ticks past. Every moment we enter a new second, a new minute, a new hour; that is change, and our fear is there. The suffering of change is present in every moment. We change from an infant into a child, from a child into a teenager, from a teenager into an adult. The adult gets old and dies; this is the suffering of change.

We think our suffering can be reduced by accumulating more wealth, but more wealth only leads to more suffering. We develop the desire to secure our wealth, but that security itself becomes suffering; we want more and more security but never find it. Our sense of insecurity will never change until we change internally.

According to the Buddha, the suffering of change also results from not appreciating the present moment. We are always looking for something new, but when it arrives, we miss what we had earlier. The child thinks, "When I'm eighteen, I will be independent from my parents. I won't have to listen to them and just do what I want." But when the child becomes a teenager, the teenager misses or longs for some part of his or her childhood. In this way, we continue to look for more changes, and we find more fear.

The suffering of change is strongly rooted in the Buddhist idea of impermanence. The basic state of impermanence is the suffering of change. Our existence is like the flame of a candle. The nature of the flame depends on change, the flame gradually consuming and depleting the wax. The longer the flame burns, the more wax is consumed until, finally, the wax is gone and the flame goes out too. Our life is like that; our existence is dependent on certain things or states becoming nonexistent, giving way to change. This constant process of change itself is the primary state of impermanence.

The suffering of change may be obvious, such as a dramatic disaster or our fear of the unknown, or it can be more subtle, such as impermanence, or our failure to appreciate the present moment. However, wherever we look in our everyday life and experience, we can see the suffering of change not only in our own lives but, given present-day worldwide communications, it is happening right in front of our eyes on a global level and in the lives of many other beings.

All-Pervasive Suffering

The third aspect of suffering is called “all-pervasive suffering.” Buddha said that this suffering is very difficult for ordinary beings to experience. It is like experiencing a single hair on the palm of one’s hand. It is very hard for us to even notice this hair. We may not feel it or even realize it is there. If someone points out to us that there is a hair on the palm of our hand then we will look and see it, but we still do not feel it. The sensation is very theoretical. But if we take that same hair and put it into our eye, there will be no doubt that there is a hair in our eye. In a similar way, Buddha said, ordinary beings experience all-pervasive suffering as if it were a hair on the palm; they do not feel it. For realized persons with sharpened awareness, however, all-pervasive suffering is like a hair in the eye; it is very evident and irritating.

Every living experience in conditioned existence is pervaded by this kind of suffering, which is the most fundamental fear of losing something very dear and precious to our hearts, as well as the fear of gaining something extremely unwanted and painful to our hearts. In other words, we actually never know what will happen to us in the next moment, we might win the lottery, meet our soul mate, get hit by a car, or simply die. If we really think about it, we are just subject to what happens in the next moment and there is no way we can be one hundred percent sure what happens in that moment, though this is exactly what we keep trying to figure out most of the time. But life comes without any warranty for anything whatsoever, although we prefer not to let this sink in too deeply. Otherwise, we would probably freak out completely. Still, the basic fear of being helplessly subject to whatever unpleasant experiences and things may come up next in our life, or of losing whatever pleasant experiences and things we may have at present, cannot be contained completely. This is what is called all-pervasive suffering.

Fundamental Fear

When we think about suffering we think of pain, we think of discomfort, we think of dissatisfaction and unhappiness, but Buddha said that the one word that sums up the whole meaning of suffering is “fear.” Suffering is fear. Whether we are happy or not, whether we are an emperor in a palace or a panhandler on the street, whatever our experiences are in this conditioned world, our lives are pervaded by fundamental fear. We fear to lose the things we value, our wealth and possessions, and we fear to gain things we do not want, such as the flu. Emperor or panhandler, their fear is the same; this subliminal panic is all-pervasive in every living heart. Ultimately, even happiness itself becomes suffering. We try to protect our happiness because we fear losing it, but we lose it anyway. Our happiness is surrounded by fear and pervaded by suffering.

The basic fact of suffering in all its facets means that we need to be honest with ourselves. We cannot just pretend that we do not have any suffering; we cannot deny our suffering or bury it

under beautiful covers, though we usually try to do so constantly. We cannot run away from it. For example, we do not want to hear about death and dying. We even avoid saying “died”; we say “passed away” or “expired” instead. It sounds as if a passport or visa has expired. With all our skill we deny the fact of our suffering, just as the Buddha’s parents tried to keep this fact hidden from him. However, once the Buddha came to realize that the world is suffering he did not run away, but he faced it. Thus, suffering was the very starting point of the Buddha’s own spiritual journey, when he discovered what was going on outside his sheltered existence as a prince in the palace and then realized the need to do something about it. Also, when he taught his students, he started by introducing them to the acknowledgment of this basic fact of life. Therefore, it is very important for us to reflect upon this basic truth in the beginning, since it is the foundation of everything that Buddhism teaches. In other words, if we don’t see or acknowledge that there is a fundamental problem and what it is, there is no point in talking about its causes or any possible remedies for it.

The Origin of Suffering

The main reason the Buddha spoke a lot about suffering is not to proclaim some kind of pessimism or make everybody depressed, but because we usually run away from suffering and avoid dealing with it. Even if we deal with it, we do not cut through its root once and forever, but apply superficial patches to feel better temporarily, such as painkillers, entertainment, jumping from one relationship to the next, buying nice things, or using drugs or alcohol. The Buddha did not say that suffering is the world’s ultimate nature or some kind of eternal unchanging natural law. Nor is the world just a random chaos of suffering that strikes us without any reason or cause. On the contrary, the second basic fact that he taught is that every kind of suffering (as well as happiness) has specific and clearly defined causes that bring it about. Thus, once we have understood and acknowledged the existence and nature of suffering, the next step is to ask, “What is it that makes our lives go wrong? What are the causes for our suffering?” Therefore, the second basic fact that the Buddha taught is the origin of suffering.

Usually, we have a lot of ideas what the causes for our suffering are, be it our unhappy childhood, our parents, our angry boss, our partner who does not understand us, our noisy neighbors, the rainy weather, and so on. Basically, we always try to blame somebody or something else if we feel unhappy. However, the Buddha said that all causes for our suffering come from our own minds and nowhere else, which is often hard to accept, especially in cases when people appear to be completely “innocent” and then very bad things happen to them. The Buddha discussed the three mental poisons as the internal causes for suffering, which are ignorance, aggression, and passion (or attachment). Since these poisons result from ego-clinging, the deepest root of all our suffering is our ego-clinging. On the basis of ego-clinging the three poisons arise in our minds, and by virtue of experiencing and acting them out, we experience all aspects of suffering. In his early teachings the Buddha talked at length about the three basic mental poisons and their many derivatives, such as jealousy, envy, pride, miserliness, spite, deception of others, and fooling ourselves.

In brief, suffering in all its forms and levels arises from our various actions of seeking for happiness but not properly knowing what leads to happiness and what leads to suffering. These actions are based on our emotions being out of control and our judgment being misguided. For

example, out of greed or hatred we may think, “If I steal this money or kill this person, I will be happy.” But if we act accordingly, all the consequences of such actions will inevitably occur sooner or later. Even if we feel better for awhile due to what we have done, the resulting unpleasant consequences, such as being constantly on the run or being thrown into jail, greatly outweigh this feeling. Sometimes these cases may take a long time to ripen into their results, but simply not seeing any immediate results does not mean that they will not appear at some point or that these causes simply do not have any results at all. There are many examples of causes that happened many millions of years ago and yet determine our life today, such as the very existence of our planet, the creation of the oxygen on earth the shaping and shifting of the continents, the changes through recurrent ice ages, and so on. Also, it is becoming harder and harder to pretend that certain actions do not have effects, such as polluting our water and our surroundings, global warming, or depleting natural resources.

In other words, though we may not see any immediate or obvious causes for our suffering in our own actions or emotions, that does not mean that there are no such causes altogether. Likewise, even if we don’t see any results of our actions and emotions right away, it does not mean there will never be any. On the contrary, the Buddha taught that every one of our experiences has a cause and that each one of our actions and emotions has an effect. If we become more aware of our emotions and actions, we can actually see many of these effects happening in ourselves and our relationships with other people.

The Cessation of Suffering

When we have discovered the origin of suffering as being specific mental poisons and the actions triggered by them, the good news is that suffering is not something we can’t do anything about or that we have to helplessly endure forever. It is precisely because suffering is neither a random event nor an eternal unchanging given that we can actually put an end to it. However, suffering will not just end suddenly one day all by itself out of sheer good luck or through the intervention of some divine grace. We have to make conscious and determined efforts to not create any further causes that lead to suffering. In other words, since suffering is the result of specific causes (mental poisons and actions), without these causes there will be no such result either. So when we have relinquished or transcended the causes of suffering, then we attain the cessation of suffering, which is the third basic fact. This is what is called nirvana or enlightenment, which refers to the state of total freedom from ego-clinging and all the causes of suffering. Nirvana is the state of freedom from all aspects of fear, pain, problems, and suffering. “Cessation” does not just mean sheer absence of suffering or a state of ultimate boredom where nothing whatsoever is going on. There is not only no suffering, but it refers to the state of utter joy and fearlessness, since there is no way for any suffering to ever occur again and since we have re-connected with our true heart, our most fundamental and unchanging nature of unconditioned happiness, wisdom, love, and compassion.

The Path

Understanding the origin of suffering and that it can be stopped leads to the means to do so. We refrain from doing what causes suffering for oneself and others, and instead we cultivate the causes that truly bring lasting happiness. This basically consists of studying, reflecting, and

meditating on the Buddhist teachings to identify our basic problem and how to overcome it. This path includes many different aspects, such as sharpening our wisdom and insight, cultivating loving kindness and compassion for all beings, investigating and becoming familiar with our minds through meditation, and practicing what is beneficial for others. Thus, the fourth basic fact taught by the Buddha is the entirety of the path as the skillful means to attain the cessation of suffering, which is the final result of this path.

From the Buddhist point of view, we have complete power to create our own world. Whether we create a world full of pain and suffering or a joyful and happy world all depends on our own actions. It's like watching TV when we are holding the remote control. There is no one else, no bossy big brother telling us. "You can't watch what you want. I will show you what to watch." Buddha says that we hold the remote control and we flip through the channels. If we see a horror film, we have a choice whether to continue to watch, suffer, and have a nightmare after that, or to change the channel to something else, perhaps the Discovery Channel. However, that may not be much better, or different, as one being is always eating another.

From the point of view of the spiritual path of Buddhism, because we are holding the remote control, we are responsible for our experiences. Why do we go back to the Discovery Channel all the time? Why do we go back to watching some horror film every week? It is because we are addicted to pain. We have a voice, we can leave the pain. But instead of leaving, we keep going back. Why? Because we have these habitual tendencies, which we call "addiction." We are addicted to our pain. It is not a question of whether we are able to free ourselves from our pain and suffering and the causes of suffering or not, but the question is whether we really want to free ourselves, whether we really want to be free from suffering. It is a big question for all of us. Do we really want freedom? Do we really want to be free from suffering? We are not sure. We sort of like it. That is why we ride roller coasters, and why we drink so much that we vomit and have a hangover the next day. We say, "I'm bored," looking for the next entertainment, the next excitement, the next vomiting. We are entertaining ourselves with our addictions.

There is no question about being free, because we can do it, we have the choice--we are holding the remote control. But, Buddha asks, are you willing to go to the next channel where you can watch a show about the most beautiful spot in the Bahamas? Do you want to experience that, or do you want to go back to the Discovery Channel where the snake is eating mice and frogs? We are addicted to pain, and it is not easy to get out of it. If we have an alcohol problem or a drug problem, it takes so much effort and courage to step out of it. In a similar way, we are totally intoxicated by suffering, by ego, by this illusion of life. We are so intoxicated and addicted that we can't even think of any other possibilities. This is what the Buddha teaches; we are the ones responsible for all of our experiences, whether it be happiness or suffering.

The Buddha even said that we can find enlightenment right within the sufferings that we experience in the human realm. Therefore, he also taught us how to take suffering itself as the path. First of all, we can look at the pain and suffering as very important experiences, because they encourage us to give rise to thoughts of renunciation, of wanting to be free from suffering and what causes it. From an altruistic perspective, when we experience pain, we see more clearly that other beings also experience many kinds of pain and suffering and thus can develop compassion for them. We can generate the wish to free them from their suffering, because we

know so well from our own experience how it hurts. Instead of adding to their suffering by being mean to them and harming them, we may try to avoid this and instead try to help others as best as we can when they suffer. In fact, we can train in remembering the suffering of others whenever we are unhappy ourselves and thus give rise to compassion and altruistic attitude, which will lead us to actually doing something about their suffering. In this way, the actual pain can become a practice on the path. Ultimately speaking, the very experience of our pain and suffering is a sharp experience of intense lucidity and clarity. We can see this when we experience it without any labeling or superimpositions. Usually, each experience arrives with a label. We see or experience something and simultaneously say, “book,” “table,” or “pain.” In this way, we don’t see the sheer experience clearly but bury it under conceptual overlay. Instead, we can try to see the raw experience, just as it is, and look at it directly without shying away, thus utilizing it to see its true nature.

When we examine these four basic facts of life, known as the four truths, we see that the first truth (suffering) is the result caused by the second truth (the origin of suffering). The third truth (cessation) is the result that is caused or realized through the cause that is the fourth truth (the path). We see that these four basic facts are nothing but causes and effects, the first two truths are the cause and effect of confusion (in Sanskrit known as “samsara”), while the second two truths are the cause and effect of rediscovering our original sanity (“nirvana” or “enlightenment”).

Identifying and acknowledging the truth of suffering is like diagnosing a disease and accepting the fact that one is sick. Learning about the origin of suffering resembles tracking the causes of one’s disease. The truth of cessation is similar to one’s health being fully restored through the sickness together with its causes being removed. The path is like undergoing the sometimes unpleasant treatments and taking the not always palatable medicines that are necessary to eliminate the disease and become healthy.

Different Paths for Different People

In terms of regaining our original sanity, as mentioned above, the Buddha taught various approaches that people with different mindsets, capacities, and interests can practice as the methods to realize inner peace and our innermost capacity for an enlightened mind. On the most basic level, the Buddhist path of working strictly within the cause-and-result framework of the above four truths leads to the liberation of the individual person who practices and accomplishes this path. This is the path of individual liberation; its fruition is the irreversible personal freedom of being entirely removed from conditioned existence with all of its suffering, pain, and confusion that are caused by the three mental poisons and the clinging to our fixed idea of ego. The primary focus of this path of individual liberation is to get oneself out of this conditioned existence as fast as possible, without any intention to ever come back and help others to gain the same freedom.

Clicking into Egolessness and Compassion

The second level of teachings by the Buddha, which is based on the first one, has a somewhat broader scope, which is known as openness, emptiness or shunyata. Although the Buddha spoke

about emptiness even in the first and most basic cycle of his teachings, from the point of view of the second cycle, the egolessness taught in the former cycle is not the complete and all-encompassing emptiness, the lack of any intrinsic nature or reality of all phenomena. In the first cycle, Buddha simply taught that there is no single, permanent, independent personal self or soul. He taught that there is no solid individual ego that exists inherently as some unchanging core of our being. In the second cycle, Buddha extended this notion of there being no inherently existing core, essence, or nature in persons to all phenomena, animate or inanimate. This is the notion of complete shunyata or selflessness. In other words, Buddha taught that outer appearances are empty of having any real or findable nature of their own, and that the same goes for the inner experiences of our thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and so forth. Everything in the outer and the inner universe has the nature of this emptiness of intrinsic existence. This emptiness is the basic nature of all phenomena, all living beings, all experiences, and all appearances. No matter how they appear and how real they may seem, actually, they have no solid inherent existence by virtue of an independent and unchanging nature of their own. Therefore, they all have the nature of shunyata.

These teachings on shunyata are also known as “the great mother who is the perfection of wisdom,” because the complete realization of shunyata is the source of all other realizations. Thus, the essence of the perfection of wisdom that realizes emptiness is known as the mother of all Buddhist practitioners and the buddhas are the ultimate fruition of practice. From this point of view, the teachings in the second cycle of the Buddha’s teachings are often considered to be his most ultimate instructions.

In this second cycle, Buddha also presented the teachings on the enlightening altruistic attitude called “awakened heart.” This attitude is the key to entering the path that has the broader scope of not just gaining one’s own personal freedom, but developing the greater vision of liberating all sentient beings--that is, of making this entire world of conditioned existence into an enlightened universe. This means that one not only strives for one’s personal freedom, but uses this freedom to compassionately help others attain it too. However, in order to have genuine compassion or love and a genuine sense of caring for other sentient beings, we must have some understanding or realization of egolessness. If we have compassion or love with an egocentric view, then that compassion and love, will not be genuine. When the experience of egolessness, selflessness or emptiness is combined with compassion and love, it becomes the perfect expression of ultimate altruism, which is not just shunyata, not just egolessness, but compassion and egolessness unified in a single vast and all-encompassing practice and experience.

When we first try to practice compassion, our intention may seem profound and genuine, but when we really look inside, we might discover that our actions are influenced by a self-centered attitude. We may be harboring certain expectations from the situation or person whom we are trying to help. We think that we will get something in return for our gesture of compassion. Why? It is because we still hold the view of ego and therefore our actions are expressions of clinging to our cherished self, opinions, and values.

For this reason, many masters teach emptiness before giving teachings on compassion, loving-kindness, or the six practices of generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom. This order of teaching may seem strange to some because emptiness is so hard to

understand. People often ask, “Why egolessness first? Why not compassion? There is so much need for real compassion and genuine loving-kindness in the world. There is so much need for generosity and all the virtuous actions that are the basis of an ethical and disciplined life.”

The answer is that all of these wonderful and beneficial things cannot be genuinely put into practice if we do not understand the view of emptiness and also have some real experience of it. We may think that we could help more people if we trained in compassion first. We may also think that when we train in emptiness we are not actually helping anyone. In fact, we may think that training in emptiness is self-serving because we are just focusing on our own mind and our own experiences. However, if we really look at what is happening as a result of this training, it is quite the opposite.

When we try to practice compassion without the view of egolessness or emptiness, we are often not really helping because we ourselves are so confused. Our own lack of clarity only produces further confusion. If we have an idea that we think will help someone, it is usually based on our own interpretation of what we think they require or want. We are not looking at the situation from their point of view. Instead of giving them what they truly need, we give what we think they need. There is clearly a difference between these two approaches. Furthermore, we have value judgments about how they should accept our help, and so we “help” them further by imposing conditions and guidelines.

On the other hand, the heart of compassion and loving-kindness that is free from ego-clinging allows us to see the suffering of others from their own perspective. We can see beyond our own ideas and beliefs. We can see what they need from their point of view, and we can apply our own wisdom at the same time. With this more open and clear view, we can see more realistically what will meet their actual needs and be truly beneficial.

When we make such a connection with the view of emptiness, it becomes a living experience in our lives and we develop a genuine desire for knowledge. Our search for enlightenment becomes a real search. Whether we are studying teachings or applying the methods of analytical meditation, we are investigating the nature of our reality with a fresh and open mind. We look deeply at the experience of body and mind, again and again. When we reach the point where we are unable to find the existence of a self, we will experience a sense of a gap. That is the beginning of certainty in selflessness, and it is the beginning of realizing the non-dual state as well. When this sense of certainty arises within our mindstream, it does not come from a long process of words and thoughts. It is not like we are being brainwashed by thinking, “I must gain certainty, I must develop ascertainment” over and over. It is simply the gap that arises in our mind. When it arises, we know it. The certainty is there in that very moment and it stays with us. When the certainty fades away, we know that too. If, at that point, we do some analysis of the self, the experience comes back, which affirms our experience and therefore boosts our sense of certainty.

This sense of confidence or assurance has to come from within. We have to engage in our own analysis of the self and selflessness and encounter the point of clicking into the state of selflessness, egolessness. This can happen at any time during meditation. The problem is that it may be a very short experience and we may miss it. Since it is such a momentary experience, we

don't see it as important and don't appreciate it. We are expecting something big. That is our major problem: we are looking for some dramatic experience where all the self falls apart, where there is a huge space called emptiness in front of us and all ego-clinging and the object of self-clinging are completely dissolved. Instead, whenever the experience of not finding the self arises, it is important for us to just rest within the gap and relax. It's not difficult. Meditation is simply learning how to let go of all thoughts, all clinging, and the analytic mind itself, just resting relaxed within nonconceptual space.

Meeting our Enlightened Heart

In the third cycle of his teachings, the Buddha emphasized the teachings on our enlightened heart or buddha nature, revealing that complete enlightenment is within our hearts right from the very beginning. The nature of reality, the true condition of mind, is not simply emptiness. The nature of mind is a luminous expanse of awareness beyond all fabrications and reference points. From beginningless time, the essential quality of this inseparable union of awareness and emptiness has never been altered or stained by relative phenomena, such as our conflicting emotions, no matter how beautiful, ugly, beneficial, or horrible they may appear. Buddha said that out of the basic nature of lucidly aware emptiness, everything can be expressed, everything arises and manifests. This luminosity is completely free from any movement of thoughts. The basic message here is that no matter which realm of sentient being we belong to, whether we are humans, animals, gods, or even demons, we all possess the same heart of enlightenment, we just have to re-discover it.

In this third cycle of teachings, Buddha also taught that the world is nothing but a creation of our minds. There is no outer creator, such as a creator god, nor any agent or energy other than our own minds. In this way, the whole world that we experience is like a dream. If we inspect our dreams, we can see that all the events in our dreams, whether they appear to be "outside" or "inside," are all happening within our minds; there is nothing outside our minds. In the same way, the world that we experience is a creation of our individual minds and our individual actions. Buddha said that the world is a creation of both our group actions and our individual actions. Therefore, we have experiences that we share with others as well as our individual experiences.

As an example, we can take an object, such as a water glass. Although this glass may be a common visual object for us, how each one of us perceives it is very individual--the ways in which we see it, feel its touch, conceive of it, label it, and experience it are completely individual. This becomes even more obvious when we take a much more "charged" example, such as the well-known figure of Chairman Mao. Some people saw Chairman Mao as a great leader, as a courageous, caring, and compassionate guide. Others feared him and saw him as an egocentric, evil-hearted person. Some may have seen him as a father figure, and someone else may have seen him as a spouse. His internal parasites and bacteria saw him as the entire universe, and mosquitoes saw him as a source of nourishment. Thus, each sentient being has very different experiences of the "same" object. Even within the same general view or framework, we have individual and unique experiences. Even those people who saw Chairman Mao as a great leader each have their individual view. Thus, the Buddha taught that whatever

our experiences, these exist only in our own mind and that there is no real external world independent of our perception.

Finally, the Buddha presented a series of particular teachings to a very limited audience that work in a most immediate way with our buddha nature through taking the fruition of the path as the path itself. Fundamentally, they are about realizing the true nature of the present moment of our mind without expecting some result in the future, but striking the essential point right here and now. This may be done through the help of visualizing certain symbolic aspects of our enlightened heart or by directly looking at our present mind.

Many Paths, Single Ground

It is often said that Buddha gave only a single teaching but people heard it in different ways. What we are doing now is hearing and repeating something that has been heard and repeated for many hundreds of years. Different understandings developed, and with them, more and more interpretations and schools. Some time after the Buddha had passed away, the community of his followers divided into the eighteen schools of the most fundamental approach of personal liberation. Later, the other approaches mentioned above flourished too, and produced different elaborations and schools. After many hundreds of years, the differences became more and more apparent.

However, every part of these teachings plays a vital role on the path. The altruistic approach of the broader scope of emptiness is based on the fundamental approach of the four truths and personal liberation. Likewise, working directly with the present moment of the mind cannot happen without being grounded in the approach of altruism and all-pervasive openness. The teachings of all three approaches include the same three subjects, particular rules of ethics and discipline, teachings on sharpening one's wisdom, and instructions on meditation. Buddha taught on egolessness, compassion, wisdom, and the true nature of the mind in all three approaches. Some teachings may emphasize or expand on one point, while others may mention it only briefly, but the basic essence of the Buddha's teaching is not different.

Clarity on the Path

In terms of practice, however, we need a certain structure, a certain direction on the path; otherwise we will become confused and lost. If there is no clarity, the path becomes spiritual materialism. It becomes a great spiritual shopping center, where we shop around among different traditions and forms and pick out the ones that seem to suit us. But we do not know what is suitable, and we do not know how to progress on the path. In this way, with such conflict and confusion, we get lost. Having a sense of direction and clarity on the path is very important, no matter which path we follow.

In Tibet, at the end of the nineteenth century, there was a great nonsectarian movement. The masters involved made it very clear that "nonsectarian" does not mean to mix everything up in one cup and drink it all down. Sometimes people think that nonsectarian means ecumenical, all religions at once, or that it means we practice everything. That view becomes problematic. According to the above masters, nonsectarian means that we continue to practice our own path

and tradition, whatever it may be. If our path is the fundamental approach of the four truths and personal liberation, we continue with this path. If our path is the altruistic path of the wisdom of emptiness, we keep practicing that. And if our path is to work with the present moment of whatever we experience, we stick to that. Nonsectarianism means having respect for every religion, every culture, every tradition of Buddhism and other faiths. At the same time, we should not mix them together, because in that case we cannot fully appreciate or benefit from any of the traditions.

It is very simple. If we mix Coke with a strawberry shake and coffee and butter tea and scotch and tequila, all in one glass, we do not know what we are drinking. The concoction upsets our stomachs, and we have to stop drinking. But if we drink one simple glass of water, we know what we are drinking. We can taste it fully. We keep a healthy stomach, so we can continue to drink. That does not mean we have to say that Coke is bad or that scotch is bad. We continue to drink our water and respect whatever other people want to drink. Learning has no limits. We can be open to learning from every tradition and every school, but we should be clear about our own path.

Class 3: “Trips of Confusion: Working with Emotions I”

Being aware of and eliminating the causes of suffering

- Emotions--what they really are
- Seeing them
- Working with them
- Transforming them

Focusing on the Root of Suffering

Whatever our condition in life, whether we are young or old, wealthy or impoverished, educated or illiterate, no matter where we live, we all are touched by the same emotions that bring happiness in one moment and suffering in the next. Though we all wish to be happy and pursue that state daily, we may feel that our efforts in that direction are often ineffectual. At the end of the day, instead of feeling content, we may feel that we have missed the boat once again; in fact, we can practically see it sailing off without us.

We might ask ourselves why, when we aim only for happiness, we often end up so far from our target. What is it that interferes with our aspirations and intentions? As taught in the last class, from the perspective of the Buddhist teachings, four profound truths are taught about our situation in this life and the suffering we experience. First, suffering is inevitable. Second, suffering has specific causes; it is not random. Third, there can be a genuine and lasting end to that suffering--we can go beyond it. Fourth, the transcendence of suffering also has specific causes. Generating those causes is what we call “the path.” It is known as the path that leads beyond suffering, the path to liberation, the way to enlightenment, and so forth. In brief, just as our suffering has causes, its coming to an end has causes too; neither is a random event.

In the particular context of the Buddhist spiritual path, the transcendence of suffering does not just mean that our relative suffering ceases and we achieve a continual state of relative happiness instead. It means that we transcend all the causes and conditions that obscure mind’s true nature and achieve the state of completely awakening to mind’s full potential. Our goal on this path is the realization of our inherent capacity of unlimited wisdom and compassion, which represents unconditioned ultimate happiness. To be on this path means that we are willing to work with our minds and that we are equally willing to feel uncomfortable in this process at times. It also means that we have a great curiosity about how things work and that we have a certain degree of passion for truth and authentic experience.

Since our suffering and pain have causes, if we discover those causes, then we can remedy them. When we are looking for the causes of suffering, the teachings of the Buddha direct us to look first at the mind as the source of our experience and the means for understanding it. When we look inward, we can see that one of the primary sources of distress in our lives comes from our experience of emotions. They seem to arise suddenly; they color our world and send us off in different directions; they spawn all kinds of hopes and fears and do not respond well to reason. Under their influence, we may fume with anger, light up with pleasure, or become unresponsive and dull. Therefore, it is essential to see what the emotions are in a more precise and complete manner. We need to get to know our emotions, recognizing their various forms, and understand

how they work. We also need to uncover any preconceptions that we may have about them. Do we celebrate them for the richness they bring to our lives or fear them for their provocative energy? Do we suppress them or indulge in them? Are we even aware of their presence as we go through the day?

What is understood in Buddhism by what we in English call “emotions” is equivalent in a general sense, but there are also notable differences. Both notions refer to states of mind in which feeling is predominant, in contrast to cognitive functioning; both describe these mind states as characterized by greater or lesser degrees of agitation, which may be accompanied by various physical responses. Thus, from the Buddhist perspective, emotions are often called “disturbing emotions” or afflicted states of mind. This includes not only our ordinary, confused experience of emotions, but also the basic cause of suffering, which is ignorance or fundamental unawareness. Buddhism speaks about three primary such afflictive emotions--passion, aggression and ignorance. From these three, jealousy and pride develop, and together, these five are called “the five poisons.” These afflicted mental states obscure the natural clarity of mind and are the causes of many unskillful and negative actions. Thus, generally speaking, when unattended by mindfulness and awareness, these emotions are regarded as destructive mental states or forces that produce and increase suffering.

A System for Understanding What Emotions Are

As we gain a deeper understanding of our emotions, however, it is possible to see and work with their intense energy in progressively more profound and skillful ways. According to the Buddhist teachings, there are three distinct ways to view emotions, or three different outlooks that we can have toward them. The first is to regard emotions as enemies or poisons that are toxic to our well-being and spiritual path. The second is to regard them as friends or supports for our development. The third is to regard them as enlightened wisdom itself.

Each of these views has a corresponding method or approach to work with the emotions. When emotions are viewed as poison, the most effective method for dealing with them is to relinquish or renounce them. When they are view as friends or supports, we work with their basic energy to transform negative patterns into positive ones. When they are viewed as enlightened wisdom, the emotions themselves are taken directly as the path. In addition, once we have an understanding of these views and methods, there is a specific, three-step technique that can be applied whenever an emotion arises. These three steps are called “mindful gap,” “clear seeing,” and “letting go” (see below). Employing this technique is immediately beneficial, because it prevents us from being overwhelmed by emotionality, allows us to see the larger context in which an emotion occurs, and brings us closer to an experience of its actual nature.

Seeing Emotions as Poison

When we first begin to work with our emotions, we usually do not know them very well. At this stage, it is necessary for us to approach our emotions carefully, with respect for their destructive power and their potential to overwhelm us. Therefore, we initially regard them as enemies, as poisonous states of mind that induce misery and illness. Because of the danger they present, we try to prevent them from developing into full-blown states of mental agitation over which we

would have no control. The method we practice at this time is to relinquish, abandon or reject them on the spot through the application of specific antidotes. For example, when aggression arises, we can apply the antidote of patience.

In this approach, the antidote and the emotion are seen as separate; the antidote is something that must be applied in order to get rid of the emotion. In other words, there is a clear distinction between the antidote and what the antidote is remedying. For example, if we were to contract a bacterial infection, we may go to a doctor who will give us an antibiotic. In this way, we will heal the infection and return to a state of health. In the same way, emotions are regarded as sicknesses and their antidotes are regarded as the medicines that bring about a cure, which returns us to a balanced and healthy state of mind.

In general, at this stage, it is important to contemplate the negative effects of our emotions--the many ways in which they impact us as well as those around us. It is essential to clearly see the full range of destruction that they can cause. Furthermore, we need to see that it is our habitual ways of dealing with emotions that make them so problematic and harmful.

Although this method of relinquishing the emotions is often helpful, there are times when it is not quite enough. No matter how badly you want to cut through an emotion, to stop it or turn it off, it still continues to arise. When that happens, what do you do? If you continue to apply this method alone, telling yourself, "I must get rid of it, I must get rid of it," you will find it even harder to eradicate that emotion. In that case, it may be more useful to consider, "Since I am having this emotion right now, I will look at it in a different way and make the best use of it."

Seeing Emotions as Useful

In the second stage of working with emotions, the view and methods are more profound. At this point, when we look at the emotions, we do not see enemies or danger. Instead, we see friends, helpers, or allies. When viewed as friends, the emotions do not threaten our well-being, but are regarded as essential to the development of deeper levels of knowledge and insight. In that way, they are seen as containing tremendous potential to liberate us from states of suffering. In fact, it is said that there can be no Buddhist path without them.

Once we have achieved some degree of familiarity with our emotions, we can see that they are not inherently negative. Practically speaking, emotions can be either positive or negative; it depends on how we experience them, work with them, and manifest their energy. From this perspective, our disturbing emotions are both the sickness and the cure; they are both the negative factors to be relinquished and the antidote that counteracts their adverse effects. In contrast to the earlier method, the gap between the emotion and the antidote is much narrower--there is not much difference between the two.

How do our emotions transform from enemy into friend, from the destroyers into the supporters of happiness? At this point, whatever emotion arises, we work with it to transform its negative manifestation into a positive expression. When we see our habitual tendency to become angry manifest, we do not run from it or try to get rid of it. We see it as an opportunity to reprocess or

recycle that energy so that it becomes something useful. In this sense, every emotion can be recycled. Nothing needs to be thrown away or treated as mental garbage or waste.

In this way, all our mental afflictions can serve as supports for our path. They can help us to go beyond the cycle of suffering. Thus, we should not become discouraged when they arise or become irritated with those whom we perceive as provoking them. If there were no one to make us angry, for example, how would we ever perfect our practice of patience and tolerance? In fact, the people who make us angry are very helpful--they are indispensable to our attaining enlightenment.

Similarly, the panhandlers on the streets who ask us for spare change are helping us to perfect the quality of generosity. An act of generosity depends on there being both someone in need of support and someone who offers it. If we have difficulties with giving, when we meet with such a situation of being asked to give it is a great opportunity to see our habitual patterns and transform them. We can practice to be more liberal with our resources and also to be more understanding and sympathetic toward those in distressed circumstances. That is why we should not get irritated by being asked for help, but simply give what we can. If we were already perfect, there would be no need to practice, because there would be no mental afflictions to overcome. If we were already generous, we would not need to practice generosity, as there would be no miserliness to overcome.

In the same way, we can recycle all our emotions into something positive and useful. We can recycle miserliness into generosity, desire into discipline, aggression into patience, laziness into diligence, distraction into concentration, and ignorance into discriminating awareness. That means that there are no emotions that we need to get rid of, that are useless or a waste of our time. All emotions and adverse conditions we face in our lives have the potential to become valuable supports for our path. That is our view at this stage; once an emotion has arisen, we make the best use of it.

Realizing Emotions as Wisdom

In the third stage, emotions are viewed as wisdom, which is their true state. They are regarded neither as destructive, nor as simply having a positive potential. Rather, the very nature of all our emotions is taught to be wisdom, which contains tremendous clarity, insight, and compassion. Therefore, there is no need to change or transform them. From this perspective, we take the emotions themselves as the path.

According to the Buddhist view, the abiding nature of our mind is wisdom and compassion, which are always together, always in union. That nature is perfectly pure, it is luminous awareness that has never been obscured or stained by our confusion or by the occurrence of afflicted mind states. When that wisdom and compassion manifest outwardly, their energy manifests in five aspects or particular qualities of wisdom. These five aspects are the five enlightened qualities of awakened mind, which are the pure essence of the five poisons.

When the energy of our emotions arises, if we are under the influence of confusion, then we perceive that energy as one of the five poisons--passion, aggression, ignorance, jealousy, and

pride. If we are free from confusion, then we recognize the essential nature of these emotions and perceive it as the display of wisdom.

At this state, we are looking at a deeper level of experience. We are looking directly, or nakedly, at our emotions and are seeing their true state. This is called taking the emotions as the path. The result is that we discover the inherent wisdom of the emotions, and we see that there is no need to change them. When we take this approach, there is no separation between the path and the result. We take the emotions as our path, and there is no other path aside from that.

In contrast, in the earlier stages the methods are more indirect. We must first either get rid of our emotions or else transform them in order to find our way out of suffering. Even when we have reached the level of appreciating our emotions, there is still a slight sense of dissatisfaction, because there is something remaining that is not right. Though we see the value of our emotions, we still think they are not good enough as they are--we must transform them into something more positive. Either way, it is necessary to change our emotions before we can deal with them directly. In the third stage, however, no change is needed. The essence of the emotions is not only the path, it is the result.

The Three Views as Stepping Stones to Wisdom

All three of these views, together with their methods, have a vital purpose. If you regard them as stages within a larger scheme, rather than as separate choices, then the process of working with your emotions becomes very profound. If you separate them as three distinct choices, then your path will be incomplete. The most beneficial viewpoint is to see them as sequential stages through which you progress, with the first stage becoming the stepping stone for the second, and the second stage becoming a stepping stone for the third.

In the first approach, we focus on the negative aspects of emotions and we make every effort to thoroughly comprehend their potential to cause harm to ourselves and others. This leads us to see why we must abandon engaging in the emotions without any sense of mindfulness or discipline. This understanding prepares us to view our emotions from a new perspective. We see how they can be either positive or negative, depending on how we relate to them. We find this viewpoint in Western psychology as well, where emotions are not regarded as being necessarily negative, but are considered to be positive factors in personal growth.

In any situation, we always have two choices: we can look at its positive side or its negative side. If we are looking at the character of an individual, for example, we can choose to focus on his or her strengths or weaknesses. If we are judging the usefulness of a medication, we can focus either on its ability to reduce high blood pressure, or on its side effects, such as muscle pain and dizziness. Or, take a sharp knife--is it positive or negative? It is neither. It is a matter of how it is used. A sharp knife can cut vegetables that help to feed hundreds of people, but it can also cut off a finger or end a person's life. There is a positive side and a negative side to everything. In the second stage, we view emotions like a sharp knife, with an emphasis on its positive potential.

In the third stage, we view the emotions as being utterly pure and completely positive. At this point we are seeing the ultimate nature of our emotions and not simply their relative, or confused, manifestations. Any display of emotion becomes the display of wisdom mind--an experience of mind's true nature. The questions are only whether and how we connect with that experience.

As we learn and work with these methods, they become very effective tools for bringing our path to its fruition. To be on the path means to work with our minds and to engage in activities that will progressively diminish suffering and increase the good qualities of happiness, wisdom, and compassion. Many methods are taught for working with our minds, and all of these can contribute toward achieving our goal. The practice of sitting meditation, for example, helps us to calm our busy minds so that we experience a greater sense of peace and clarity. Then there are the trainings in compassion, which help to transform our usual, self-centered way of thinking into concern for the welfare of others.

Such practice instructions are straightforward and easy to understand. For sitting meditation, we are taught to simply follow our breath, let go of our thoughts, and relax. If we are practicing generosity, our intention is simply to benefit others by offering whatever we can. So if we could just practice according to those instructions, our journey would be quite simple. However, we spend most of our time struggling to calm our agitated mind, which is in an almost constant state of distraction. Where does our difficulty come from? Why isn't it as simple as it sounds?

The primary obstacle we meet with when we begin to work with our mind is our own ego-clinging. By "ego," we mean the sense of "I" that we perceive as being "me" or "myself." "Clinging" refers to our ingrained habit of holding to that "I" closely and making it the primary reference point for all our thoughts and actions. According to the Buddhist view, this ego is illusory; it does not truly exist in any permanent or ultimate sense. Yet we cherish this "self" inordinately, and it is just this "I" that feels anger, passion, jealousy, pride, or indifference toward other people and things. Thus, all our disturbing and persistent emotions are tied closely to our ego-clinging, and most of our time in meditation is spent trying to pacify those emotions.

In other words, we spend most of our time working with the obstacles to the path, rather than working with the path itself. When we find ways to work skillfully with our emotions and our ego-clinging, our path becomes much more effective. If we can use our emotions to pacify our emotions--if we can use what we already have to achieve our goal--then the path becomes much swifter.

Since emotions are so varied in type and strength, the ways of pacifying them may be different as well. Some emotions can be pacified through meditation and the conventional path of practice. Other emotional tendencies should be treated in the beginning by mental health professionals. We may need assistance from psychologists or psychiatrists to process emotions in the early stages of working with them. When the emotion is based on an imbalance in the elements of our bodies, we may also need help from physical health professionals. Sometimes different kinds of medicines, exercises, or physical adjustments can be very helpful. In particular, yoga can be very beneficial, especially if practiced in conjunction with other methods of working with the emotions. Yoga can relax our body so that our mind can follow suit. While meditation can solve

some people's emotional problems, others might need the aid of additional methods. We have to find remedies that work for us.

Past Causes and Present Conditions Create Suffering

In order to work with our emotions, we must find out how they operate. From the Buddhist point of view, emotions arise on the basis of two factors, causes and conditions. The first factor is the karmic cause or seed, which may have been planted in this life or in past ones. The second factor refers to environmental conditions in the present that may influence the ripening of that seed in certain ways. When the environment contains conditions that support the growth of the seed, then it will develop and produce its fruit or result.

According to the Buddhist view, the particular body that we have right now is a result of karmic seeds. The physical existence of all beings, human, animal, or other, is produced from karmic seeds. Furthermore, there is a fundamental relationship between the physical body and the mind; this means that there is a physical as well as a mental basis for our emotions.

In the field of neuroscience, there are some studies which say that the experience of emotions is triggered as a result of the firing of certain neurons and electrical impulses, which stimulate particular areas of the brain. From the Buddhist point of view, however, emotional experience does not originate solely on the basis of physical stimuli; it is the product of karmic seeds and certain supporting conditions, which include our physical body and genetic makeup.

These karmic seeds are of two types--common and individual. Common karma, or group karma, is like the DNA that is shared by all human beings and that makes us all "human" as opposed to another form of being. In addition, there is individual karma, which is like the specific DNA that we inherited from our parents, which makes us a particular human being. Because of common karma we share certain experiences with others, like being born in the East or West, or in a time of peace or war. Because of individual karma we possess physical and mental characteristics that are particular to us alone. We may be tall or short, industrious or lethargic, artistically or athletically inclined. The environment we live in may support values of kindness, liberality, and peace or it may breed aggression, fear, and chaos. We may find ourselves in harmony or in conflict with our environment.

From the Buddhist perspective, all of this is not random; it represents the display of causes and their effects, which is the definition of "karma." However, ultimately, the source of karma is the mind--a thought or intention produces a physical or verbal action, which then produces a result.

The scientific studies that look at the physical elements and mechanisms involved in the arising of emotions are producing more and better information every day. However, even when looked at from a purely physical point of view--"emotion as a purely physical event"--there is still the functioning of cause, supporting conditions, and effect. The functioning of our brain and nervous system is affected by factors such as the food we have eaten, how well our respiratory system supplies our blood with oxygen, and the way in which our particular brain and its pathways are formed.

It is important for us to see the correlation between body and mind. In the Buddhist view, the body is seen as a support for our mental activities. The way in which body and mind develop and function is directly connected to their karmic causes, in conjunction with present conditions, which exert individually different degrees of influence. Thus, the functioning of our body and mind in any moment is dependent upon the numerous causes and conditions that preceded that moment.

Accordingly, emotions do not arise haphazardly or randomly, without causes or conditions. They do not arise suddenly out of nowhere, as we often think. When we perceive an emotion as arising abruptly or unexpectedly, it is because we do not see its causes and conditions, which can evolve from subtle habitual tendencies, or karmic seeds, that have lain dormant in our minds like “sleeper cells.” When they become activated, it seems to us that the emotion appears “suddenly” and with no obvious cause.

The Buddha sometimes called these dormant tendencies “small growers” or “subtle expanders,” which means that they start from very subtle causes and conditions and then grow into something very large. At the moment we perform any action, whether it is positive or negative, that action makes an imprint in our mind streams. That imprint is like a seed; it carries the potential to ripen and yield a result. In addition, we develop habitual tendencies when we perform certain actions repeatedly. If we become angry and speak harsh words once, then when someone irritates us in the future, we may be more likely to react in the same way. Over time, we may develop a predisposition to speak harshly, even with less or no provocation at all.

When, in addition, present conditions in our environment support this tendency, such as undergoing stress at work, having difficulty with relationships, or struggling with an illness, then that latent tendency can expand suddenly. The final trigger can be something relatively small or seemingly insignificant--a moment of frustration or impatience--but in combination with all the underlying other factors, our latent emotional tendency may erupt into supersize. This is simply the action of karma, the coming together of many causes and conditions, which produce a certain result.

If we are going to rid ourselves of the destructive aspects of the energy of our emotions, we cannot just work on the conditions that are present in our physical and psychological environment. We must work on transforming both the causes that originate from the past and the present circumstances in our lives that condition our minds and enmesh us in negative habitual patterns. In many cases, systems of psychotherapy work on the level of conditions rather than on the level of the above causes. Such approaches are helpful for gaining enough stability and strength of mind so that we can reach the more fundamental causes through the practice of meditation. It is helpful, therefore, to recognize that our emotional disturbances develop from both causes and conditions. Conditions are more easily seen, as they exist and function on a more superficial level, but their actual causes are the underlying influences and habitual patterns that exist at deeper levels of the mind.

How to Work with Emotions

Having familiarized ourselves with the three stages of working with the emotions, we can now look at a further means for dealing with our emotions in our day-to-day lives. There is a three-step technique that can be applied at any stage of our practice. Whether we are viewing our emotions as poisons, as friends, or as manifestations of the enlightened mind--that is, no matter whether we are renouncing our emotions, transforming them, or taking them as the path--we can employ the three steps of “mindful gap,” “clear-seeing” and “letting go.”

The first step, “mindful gap,” refers to the practice of distancing ourselves from whatever emotion may be rising. While remaining mindful and aware, we feel the emotion and hold still, without reacting. We can then view the emotion and the experiencer of the emotion as being separate. We feel that there is a gap between the two. It is this gap, attended by mindfulness, which provides the ground or psychological space for working with our emotions. When we are able to create a “safe” distance, so to speak, we can see the emotion more clearly without becoming overwhelmed by it.

The second step, “clear seeing,” refers to developing our ability to see clearly both the emotion and the entire “landscape” or the wider setting in which it occurs. In this way, we see the whole picture. We see not only a specific emotion and its characteristics, but also our emotional patterns and how they relate to our interactions with the people and events in our environment. In this way, we develop a more profound understanding of our emotions and the sum of their internal and external causes and conditions.

The third step, “letting go,” refers to the methods by which we physically and mentally release emotional energy. While there are several approaches to this, including physical exercise, working with the breath, and relaxation techniques, the primary method is letting go through awareness. The very fact of being aware is already a process of letting go. If we have properly applied the first two methods of “mindful gap” and “clear seeing,” then at this level, we begin to let go of our fixation or grasping onto the intensity of the energy, or the display, of the emotion itself.

As we learn these three steps, we develop our capacity to relinquish the emotions, to transform them and, finally, to recognize their ultimate nature of wisdom.

Class 4: “Trips of Confusion: Working with Emotions II”

A three-step technique for working with emotions in-the-moment

- Mindful gap
- Clear seeing
- Letting go

Mindfulness--The Key to Working with Emotions

The key for starting to work with our emotions is mindfulness, which is why the first of the three steps to deal with emotions that were introduced before is called “mindful gap.” In one of his teachings the Buddha said, “For those who have mindfulness, no emotions will arise that are not embraced by mindfulness. They will not afford the actions of negative influences any opportunities. They will not travel down wrong paths. Mindfulness is like a door. It will not let the mind and its expressions stray into non-virtue.”

The great teacher Shantideva also compared mindfulness to a door – just as a strong well-built door will keep undesirable people out of our house, strong mindfulness will protect our mind against the intrusion of disturbing emotions. Like thieves and pickpockets, he said, the emotions are always on the lookout for an opportunity to strike. If we give them the slightest chance, they will steal our calm of mind, our positive states of mind, and our virtues. The very first time that we forget to lock the door of our mind, these difficult emotions will seize the opportunity to enter and steal as much of our wealth of virtues as they can. If our mindfulness is strong, however, the thieves of non-virtue will not be able to enter easily, so our virtues will be well-protected.

The word “mindfulness” implies *remembering* to look, *remembering* to see, and *remembering* to manifest our wisdom and compassion, in other words, both our discriminating intelligence *and* skillful means.

The practices of mindfulness are not difficult. The difficulty lies in remembering to apply them. That always seems to be the problem, isn't it? We are told how to work with our emotions, how to look at their nature, and how to apply remedies for this and that. The instructions are simple and have been given over and over, thousands of times. The real problem is remembering the instructions and applying them when we actually need them. A vague memory of something we once heard is not very helpful. We have to remember the methods accurately and precisely, to remember what to do when emotions arise, and how and when to do it. We need to remember all of that on the spot. If we do, it is really the only mindfulness practice we need.

Step One: “Mindful Gap”--Feel, Hold, Look

The first step in the three-step process of working with emotions in our day-to-day lives is called “mindful gap.” This technique itself has three aspects, or ways, of practicing with the emotions. The first is “distancing,” the second is “patience,” and the third is “right view.”

Distancing

Distancing refers to the practice of disengaging ourselves from whatever emotion may be arising in any moment, creating a gap between ourselves and the emotion. Here, mindfulness means to first notice the emotion and to feel or experience it. Then, in that moment, the instruction is to hold back, remain still, and not react right away. We do not need to do anything but remain mindful, conscious, or aware of the emotion. Whenever we remember this, we create a gap in which we can view the emotion and the experiencer of the emotion as being separate. Thus, this step refers to our ability to feel and experience this gap that provides the psychological space for us to see the emotion more clearly, without becoming overwhelmed by it. When we can see the emotion clearly, we can begin to understand it, and when we understand it clearly, we have a greater chance of being able to relinquish it, transform it, or see its wisdom nature. On the other hand, if we cannot feel this gap and step back a bit, our experience can feel overwhelming and it will be very hard for us to work with our emotions. Thus, the experience of “mindful gap” becomes a necessary condition for changing our perspective on our emotions and for managing our feelings.

This is similar to the experience of being on a beach and looking at the waves on the ocean. When we are at a safe distance from the waves, they are beautiful to watch. However, if an unexpectedly large wave or a set of waves suddenly emerges and rushes toward us, what do we do? If we are paying attention, naturally, we will back away. If we have *not* been paying attention, then when we finally notice what is happening we could become confused and run in the wrong direction, perhaps even toward the waves, which could overwhelm us and drag us under.

It simply makes sense to be attentive and put a safe distance between ourselves and any large ocean waves. If we know a storm is approaching, then we could choose to look at the ocean from the top of a cliff instead of the water’s edge. From such a height, we can see the full beauty of the landscape, not only the contours of each wave but also the totality of the ocean and the sky stretching from horizon to horizon, the shifting clouds, the shadows, and the sunlight. From this perspective, the force of the waves is no longer a threat. We can enjoy and appreciate their beauty and energy. However, if we are facing something greater – a hurricane or tsunami – then the intelligent thing to do is to leave the beach altogether.

It is the same with our emotions. Some are manageable, and we can withstand and even enjoy their turbulent display from a reasonable distance. However, others are tsunami-like in their scale and power. They can be so huge and overwhelming that they can engulf not only us but also many others around us. Some emotions are so powerful that they can “drown” thousands of people. Those are the ones we need to retreat from immediately. There is no scenic overlook where it will be safe to watch the display of those cataclysmic waves. That is why the instructions for the first stage of working with emotions, which tell us to run from them, can be so useful.

As a result of gaining greater understanding of our emotions, we develop more profound skills to monitor and transform them. We gain the ability to change the function that the emotions usually perform, which is to disturb our mind and perpetuate habitual patterns. Moreover, both the increase in our understanding and our greater skillful means are the result of gaining more distance from our emotions. Therefore, our practice of working with our emotions is grounded

in the experience of “mindful gap.” When the emotions arise, first we feel them, then hold a minute without reacting, then look. Look at the gap, feel it, and experience it. Usually, we respond to our emotions immediately, sometimes almost instantly. In the moment an emotion arises, we impulsively react physically or verbally, perhaps with curse words. Of course, there are a lot of reactions going on mentally too. But all those responses are the result of non-mindfulness and non-attentiveness. When we follow such impulses, we have no chance to experience the gap. Impulses like these do not bring about positive results. Good results arise from mindfulness, attentiveness, and heedfulness.

The first step in developing “mindful gap” is to resolve not to respond immediately or act impulsively when an emotion arises, as we usually do. In a way, we could see our acting and reacting as the role that we play as the agent or the press secretary of our emotions. In order to be able to comment accurately on the intentions of our emotions, we first have to understand them. Then we can be their emissary or their interpreter. However, we usually try to do that too quickly. Before we have processed and understood what our emotions are trying to tell us, we have already talked to the press and broadcast what we think we know to the world. You can see how we would get in trouble that way. As a result of our misinterpretation, we say things that are not true. We act upon things in ways that are inappropriate. We may expect good results from our actions, but that is unrealistic and unreasonable. How can a good result come from a misunderstanding? When we misinterpret our emotions, they seem to intensify and become even more powerful, as if they were angry at us. When we don’t understand their message, which is fundamentally an expression of wisdom, they seem to get upset and make themselves even stronger to give us an even more potent lesson.

Cultivating Patience

The technique of “mindful gap,” as mentioned earlier, consists of three progressive steps for working with emotions. The first, “distancing,” is the basic experience of “gap.” The second is the application of “patience,” which is the phase in which we begin to investigate our emotions and truly get to know and understand them. Patience is particularly important, as it is through this training that we are led to the realization of the third phase, “right view.”

Patience is something we must commit to practicing and remember to apply again and again. If we can be patient in the face of a single strong emotion, we will get to know it well. We will come to understand how it arises and what conditions typically surround its appearance. But, just like getting to know and understand a person, it takes a long time. We cannot expect to do it overnight. If we take the time to cultivate patience, then when our emotions are accosting us, that patience will be able to transform them.

The essence of patience is to keep looking at our emotion, which we see as separate from ourselves at this point, without reacting. By looking again and again, we can see how it changes. For instance, our anger does not stay exactly the same for a long time. It heats up and cools down. It re-ignites and eventually dissolves without a trace, until we are reminded of it again. In fact, we have to sustain our anger by remembering repeatedly why we are angry. We have to keep reminding ourselves about the bad thing “so-and-so” did to us, which perpetuates and justifies our anger.

We often say that time heals wounds, but in fact the process of healing is more profound than that. If we just lay our problem aside and simply hope that time will heal it, we may forget it for a while, but later on the habitual tendencies that led to that problem will return. Through practicing patience, however, we begin to undermine this habitual pattern instead of reinforcing it. By simply observing the emotion, we interrupt its momentum. We can see, with a greater sense of freedom, spaciousness, and relaxation, how our anger manifests and changes from moment to moment. As other habitual patterns emerge or as conditions in the environment change, its intensity could fluctuate, or it could shift its focus to a new object, such as thinking, “The real culprit is so-and-so’s supposed friend, who has always been unkind to me.” To work with the root of the emotion, we must be patient with it and let our patience transform it.

Transformation through Right View

The practices of “distancing” and “patience” lead us to what is called the “right view” of emotions. This refers to how we can understand our emotions in a deeper sense. It does not refer to holding a correct religious or spiritual belief. Rather, it means that we have a genuine understanding of the true nature or reality of emotions. What occurs at this point is that our perception of our emotions changes. We begin to see them as they truly are.

Conventionally speaking, the root of our problem with our emotions is our fixation on them as being truly existing and permanent things called “anger,” “jealousy,” or “passion.” That perception is transformed by seeing their impermanent and insubstantial nature. If, for example, our view of anger is not obscured by present circumstances, if we are not overwhelmed but can step back, experience the gap, and look at the emotion in a more objective way, we will see that the anger is already changing just *because that is its nature*. As a result, we will see that our habitual reactions to our emotions are not beneficial and that we do not want to continue to react impulsively on something that changes so rapidly. We will become more and more enthusiastic about applying mindfulness, attentiveness, and heedfulness. We could even become addicted to mindfulness!

By using the first step of this three-step process, “mindful gap,” we attempt to transform our usual tendency of acting on emotions as soon they arise. This means that we familiarize ourselves with relating with our difficult emotions in an altogether better way — first, by creating some distance through a sense of mindfulness and patience; next, by a precise and thorough investigation of what they are; and finally, by applying the correct view of them.

Changing Our Outlook

Whenever we find ourselves experiencing a strong emotion, what we ordinarily see is only how problematic the emotion is for us personally, as well as how annoying, troublesome, or threatening the person is who has provoked our emotions. However, here we do not look at that person and indulge in such thinking, which only reflects an attitude of self-cherishing, the feeling that one’s own views and sensibilities are of greater importance than those of another person. Rather, we shift our attitude and try to look at the situation in a more positive light. We try to see how that person could actually be helping us. Paradoxically, the more we impute negative

attributes and intentions to the other party, the more we intensify our own disturbing emotions and increase our suffering.

By changing our outlook, we can see that the people whom we ordinarily perceive as being difficult are actually benefiting us; their actions serve to support the strengthening of our mindfulness. In this way, they serve the same function as friends, whom we identify as positive supports. Friends, after all, are the ones we count on when we need help. And if we are going to work with difficult emotions, we need these “friends” to help us generate them. Practicing in this way is an effective means of transforming our negative habitual patterns.

This is the view of the optimistic brand of Buddhists, who see that emotions carry tremendous potential to support their vision of enlightenment and freedom for all sentient beings. They are optimists, who see the constructive side of demanding people and situations. When I was in Greece, I appreciated the way the people there saw difficulties. If you break your leg, they say, “Oh, you’re lucky you didn’t break the other leg.” If you break both legs, they say, “Oh, you’re lucky you didn’t break any arms. Now you can still eat.” And so on. If you have an especially bad accident, like a spinal injury, they say, “Oh, you’re lucky you didn’t die.” And if you die in the accident, they say, “Oh, it’s lucky he died quickly.”

If we remember to look at our experiences with mindfulness, then whatever occurs, we will not get upset right away; instead, we will see everything as an opportunity. This applies especially to uncomfortable or challenging situations that we cannot avoid. Shantideva wrote, “If you can change something, why be upset about it? On the other hand, if you can’t change it, why be upset?” Thus, if we can do something to improve a situation, why worry about it and not do what needs to be done? But if there is absolutely nothing we can do to change things, getting upset does certainly not help either; it doesn’t change anything. Instead, Shantideva suggests that we take these situations as the path. Our lives are all too short, so we should use them as opportunities to cultivate happiness. If we can change our outlook and regard all situations as opportunities to strengthen our mindfulness, the process of pacifying our conflicting emotions will have begun.

Therefore, when difficult emotions come up, we can, and definitely should, make an effort to change our ingrained impulsive patterns of reacting. These habitual tendencies are precisely what we are trying to transform, and an excellent way of doing so is to cultivate opposite habits. This kind of training will turn around our way of viewing difficult emotions and situations. It will reduce the number and intensity of the disturbing emotions we have to contend with. This is especially important when it comes to relating harmoniously with our friends and family.

We might try to apply the technique of “mindful gap” as a kind of short-term pilot project. It will be easier to do if we think of it as a test or trial rather than as something that we must do for the rest of our life, which is unlikely to work. Shantideva says that familiarity makes everything easier. This becomes especially clear when we look at our patterns of anger. The more accustomed we become to reacting to situations angrily, the better we become at getting angry. We will find ourselves able to get angry faster and more easily, with less provocation. But the advantage of the principle of familiarity is that it works with remedies for difficult emotions as

well. By continually applying the antidotes to our emotions, we will become ever more familiar with them and will find that the process of pacifying them will get easier.

It is helpful to practice these mindfulness methods as much as we can and whenever we can. That will enable us to work on our emotions little by little. Our practice does not have to be dramatic to be effective. A little practice here and there will accumulate positive tendencies, authentic wisdom, and a more profound and correct view.

Step Two: “Clear Seeing”--Developing a Complete Picture of Our Emotional Being

The second step in working with the emotions is “clear seeing.” Once we have developed the experience of “mindful gap” and the ability to view our emotions from a safe distance, we should next train our minds in clear seeing. The term “clear seeing” means that a complete picture becomes clearly apparent--in this case both the particular emotion that we are experiencing and the entire setting in which it manifests.

When we look at our emotions within this larger context, we can see the experience of emotions more clearly. This is opposite to what we do when we zoom in with a camera lens in order to see an image in a more magnified and detailed fashion. When what we are looking at is too magnified, we don't see it very clearly. Instead, the experience can be overwhelming and can interfere with our ability to be aware. For example, when we look through a powerful magnifying glass at a single dot, it becomes fuzzy, like one of those extremely blown-up images from a comic book we sometimes see in a museum; we can't see anything but the dots. When we zoom back out a little bit, however, we can see the picture more clearly.

When we apply “clear seeing” to an emotional situation, it is like going beyond the dots--beyond the surface level of the emotions. When we pull back just enough, the full picture of our emotional landscape suddenly emerges. It is an amazing experience when we suddenly see the whole picture.

Identifying Our Emotions

Clear seeing is a tool that helps us develop a profound understanding and view of emotions. Through this practice, we can gradually develop a complete picture of who we are emotionally. The first exercise in this process is to identify the various emotions we experience. We need to know for ourselves, in a personal and direct way, exactly which emotions we go through. Further, in order to have a clear understanding of the individual identity of these emotions, we need to know the defining characteristics of each one. How do we acquire this knowledge? When an emotion comes up, we look at it thoroughly, investigate it, and identify its particular traits.

When we have had some experience working with our emotions, we will see that our relationship to our emotions operates pretty much on the same principles as our relationships to other people. If there is a relationship in our life that needs to be worked on, we need to be able to see the other person clearly. We need to know who they are. What are their qualities and patterns? How

does the connection between us work? Therefore, first and foremost, we need to know and to understand.

Similarly, in order to work with our emotions effectively, we must see them clearly and develop a thorough understanding of them. That is the only way in which we will be able to make use of the third step of working with our emotions, which is “letting go.” Otherwise, whenever we talk about letting go of any emotion, we won’t really know *what* to let go of. We know that we are supposed to let go of something, but we often don’t know what that something is. There are so many emotions, and so many aspects to those emotions, that the process can become quite complicated. So in order to effectively and progressively transcend or let go of our disturbing emotions, we need to know and see them clearly. We need to know exactly what they are like, how they arise, where they are in our body, where they go, when we chase after them, and so on. This process of clearly defining our emotions is an essential precursor to any ability to truly free ourselves from their painful hold on us.

As far as the path of working with the emotions is concerned, it is vital to recognize the particular emotions that we ourselves are experiencing. It is not enough to simply be satisfied with a general explanation on what emotions are and how they apply to sentient beings at large. We must become skillful at pinpointing our own individual experience of the emotions. If we write a research paper on emotions, to relate to a general theory is sufficient. As long as we are not concerned with transcending our own emotions, theory is enough. However, if we really understand the importance of working with our own difficult emotions and want to free ourselves of them, we need to connect with them personally.

Evaluating Our Emotions

Thus, the first step here is to identify whatever emotion is present in our mind, and after that we must identify *how* we experience it. Instead of theoretical explanations, we need a more experiential understanding. One way to begin this investigation is to ask ourselves a series of questions, and then evaluate the emotion based on our responses. In this way, we further develop an understanding of our emotional portrait. Such questions include:

- How strong or intense is this emotion?
- If the emotion is strong, does it start off weak and gradually become more powerful, or does it arise immediately in a powerful way?
- How long does the emotion last? What is its duration?
- How frequently does this emotion come up? How often does it visit me?
- Is my experience of it direct, obvious, and immediate, or is it more hidden, creeping up on me in a subtle manner?

These are ways to evaluate the overall strength of an emotion and to begin to develop an individual picture of our emotional being. It helps us to see where we need to focus our path by distinguishing the emotions that require immediate attention from those that can be addressed in the future. While most of these questions can be answered through direct observation, it is worth discussing the aspect of “hidden” emotions in more detail, since they are less obvious and therefore more difficult to recognize and work with.

We can compare emotions that are experienced in hidden ways to the experience of coarse and subtle thoughts. Coarse thoughts are obvious. They can be identified immediately because it is easy to see when we are thinking about something. They are like emotions that are experienced directly, which we can plainly identify as being present. On the other hand, subtle thoughts are not so apparent. They operate beneath the surface. We usually don't even realize that they are there. When we look more closely, however, we might be able to observe them as a stream of tiny thoughts. Our hidden emotions operate in much the same way. They play out beneath the surface of our awareness as concealed undercurrents of feeling.

We tend to think that the more blatant and strongly manifesting emotions are always the most harmful. They can feel hot, painful, and very uncomfortable. However, it is important for us to realize that the emotions that we don't see, which exist beneath our conscious awareness, may actually be more dangerous. Suppressed or repressed emotions tend to be experienced as this kind of undercurrent. They can actually become more damaging when they surface suddenly, manifest in indirect ways, or for reasons that are unrelated to the immediate situation. Something happens and we do not know why we react the way we do.

The most fundamental teachings of the Buddhist path, which are given at the first stage of our path, speak about emotions, whether coarse or subtle, as being "defilements." From this perspective, too, the coarse defilements may seem to be stronger and most obstructive to our liberation, but what really keeps us down and anchors us in conditioned existence for long periods of time are the more subtle defilements. Therefore, we must try to evaluate for ourselves how our emotions are experienced, and cultivate the mindfulness and awareness of our full emotional landscape.

Recognizing the Landscape of our Emotions

All of the steps we have taken so far have helped us to identify and evaluate our emotions and begin to get a picture of our own emotional makeup or the emotional side of our mind. What we need to do next is to look at the environment in which our emotions manifest. In this landscape, we can see what it is that actually triggers our emotions. While the deeper causes are not always clear, the supporting conditions are usually discernible. So the next phase in the step of "clear seeing" is to look at our environment to discover what conditions produce or instigate the arising of our emotions, or rather, what environmental factors the emotions depend on.

Let's say we go to a beautiful popular beach for the afternoon. But instead of relaxing, we become anxious about the crowds, then irritable from the hot sun, and we start fighting with our friend. Not only do we ruin our own holiday, but we ruin the day for our friend and perhaps for others nearby who overhear us. This is an example of the way our habitual patterns combine with causes and conditions to affect the whole environment.

By clearly observing the interconnections between our emotions and the environment around us, we will become better able to witness our emotional patterns. We will see them more accurately and on a deeper level, as well as recognizing the ways in which certain feelings and situations keep repeating themselves. When we can predict the ways in which our emotions are likely to

arise and be triggered, we will gain some power in the situation; we can increase our mindfulness and be cautious when necessary. We can also see how, at certain times and in certain situations, we lose our grip on our mindfulness. Then we forget all about “mindful gap” and “clear seeing” and become totally overpowered by and under the influence of our emotions. It is important to observe all these factors and processes. In this way, we can begin to connect all the dots and get the whole picture of subject, object, and the interaction between these two.

One tendency that we have is to narrow our focus onto just one part of the picture; we look at just the object or just the subject. With our camera lens we zoom in on one spot, which becomes so magnified or exaggerated that nothing else can be seen. If we zoom in on the object side, then we do not see the subject side, or the gap between us and the object, or the surrounding environment. Sometimes, we can't seem to hold our focus on anything at all. Our mind is like a camera that is always in motion; when we try to focus on something, it makes us dizzy. So, what is important here is to develop a sense of discriminating awareness and bring that to our way of looking. We are slowly building up our ability to see the complete picture: the perceiving subject, the object of our emotions, the conditions in the environment, and the whole world surrounding us.

“Clear seeing,” then, is a tool that you can use to deal with your emotions much more positively, for the benefit not only of yourself but also of others. The more you are able to deal with your own emotions, the better you will be able to bring peace, joy, and happiness into the world. It starts with your immediate environment. When you have explored your emotions thoroughly and come to understand them, you are able to see how they interact with conditions to affect your environment, creating a ripple effect, like a pebble thrown into a calm lake. Or, we could say that when a strong emotion arises in your mind, the igniting of neurons in your brain can create a burst of fire that courses through the wider world, between you and another person and beyond that.

Step Three: “Letting Go”--The Scent of Emotions

While the first step in working with our emotions is to create a “mindful gap,” and the second is to investigate our emotions and their environment through “clear seeing,” there is still a third and final crucial step. This step of “letting go” means to let go of these difficult emotions of ours. After seeing them clearly, the point is to release them. How do we do that?

The fact is that we cannot fully release our emotions right away. It is most important that we acknowledge this. Although this may be disappointing to hear, the good news is that it is possible to work gradually toward this goal. For example, when an emotion comes up, we can release perhaps half of its energy. After that, the next time this emotion arises, we can release perhaps half of the other half. Then, on the third try, we can release half of the remaining half. This is the way to let go of our difficult emotions completely, or almost completely. By taking small steps, each time we let go, the emotion that we are left with becomes a little smaller.

By expecting to be able to release our negative emotions fully, all at once, we deprive ourselves of satisfaction, because this will never happen. But there is a beauty to the way it actually works, because each and every time we release some energy, the emotion grows less intense and more

workable. To make negative emotions workable is a very good goal. We need to accept that, as long as we are on the path of working with our emotions, a part of their energy will remain.

The part that is left behind is called a habitual tendency, or a subtle obscuration. It is like the scent that lingers when a perfume bottle is emptied. The scent in the bottle will linger long after the perfume is gone. Or it is like the fragrance that remains in an elevator after somebody wearing perfume has stepped out; traces of the smell remain in the air. Similarly, even though an emotion may be gone, some traces or imprints of it will still linger.

Letting go of our negative emotions actually takes place in two stages. In the first stage, we try to release this emotion little by little so that its intensity diminishes over time and eventually becomes quite workable. After that, in the second stage, we need to exert ourselves at a much more subtle level so that, gradually, we rid ourselves even of the scent that is left behind. This is a difficult process, but if we want to be rid of negative emotions, it is necessary.

How do we go about gradually releasing our emotions? We need to train ourselves to become fully aware of how we experience our emotions both physically and mentally. Thus, we are working with two aspects of our experience, body and mind. First, we need to notice how our emotions are affecting us in every part of our body, from our brain to our heart to our fingers and toes. Second, we need to become aware of how our mind is functioning or engaging with our emotions.

Becoming a Good Reporter of Our Emotions

Awareness is simply the state of being alert or cognizant. It means to perceive what is happening with the body, the mind, and the emotions, and to notice how they function. “To be aware” simply means just being there and observing what is there. There is no need to do anything else. Practicing awareness is a lot like being a good reporter. If you are a good journalist, you just observe the situation and then write about it. You don’t interfere with it. You ask only clear and objective questions, not suggestive ones. So, like a good investigative reporter, when we attempt to look more clearly at our emotions, we should not be looking for answers that confirm what we already think we know.

Letting Go through the Body

We tend to think of meditation as being only a mental practice, but it is also physical. We can be helped to release our emotions if we first relax our body. Keeping good posture enables our inner energy to flow more freely. Once the energy is flowing freely and our body is more relaxed, we will have access to more tools for releasing our emotions.

For example, when you feel angry you might find your body shaking and heating up. To release this anger, first try relaxing your body. Breathing can help you to do this. Even a single cycle of deep breathing is helpful for the physical release of an emotion. Inhale deeply without rushing to exhale. Experience it for a moment, and then let the breath go. Certain kinds of physical exercise, such as yoga and swimming, can also be beneficial. Yoga, in particular, can help by improving the flow of energy in our body and also by alleviating some of the tightness caused by

strong emotions. If you are not able to do these sorts of exercises, you can just try relaxing your body or even just lying down.

However, when you do any of these exercises, or even when you simply try to relax, you must at the same time maintain a connection with your mental experience of the emotion. Otherwise, this just becomes another way of distracting yourself and thereby suppressing your emotions. In other words, this is not working with the emotions, but just another form of denying them.

Letting Go through Awareness

Next, we work with releasing the emotion mentally. We begin by identifying the emotion clearly and precisely. We do this by labeling it. We can simply note to ourselves, “anger,” or “jealousy,” or “fear,” or “anxiety.” There is no need to elaborate further on this label by thinking about the details of the story line. Labeling is not intended to make things more convoluted. Rather, it is simply a function of our fundamental intelligence or discriminating awareness, which clearly distinguishes between phenomena and discerns the particular emotion we are experiencing.

Mentally letting go of our emotions begins once again with simple awareness. You direct your awareness to the negative emotional energy that is bothering you and try to experience that energy fully. Feel it, be aware of it, acknowledge it--and then let it go. The very fact of acknowledging the emotion will begin the process of letting go. Just as with the act of physically releasing the emotion, it is necessary first to observe it, like a good reporter. There is no need to push. Your difficult emotion will inevitably change naturally and go away naturally. Emotions are like thoughts. We don't have to either create thoughts, on the one hand, or push them away, on the other. Thoughts come and go naturally. As far as Buddhism is concerned, this is just the way things are.

Once we do that, no further labeling is necessary to release our emotions and thoughts. When thoughts arise during our meditation of calm abiding, we simply watch them arising, acknowledge them by labeling them, and then let them go. The same techniques apply to the process of working with the emotions; we watch them arise, we label them, and then we let them go.

We don't need a lot of effort in order to let emotions go. We can just observe them. That's enough. However, we do need to release our fixation on our thought processes. We do this by relaxing our obsession with them, relaxing the thought processes of clinging and fixation. When we relax our clinging to our emotions, acknowledge them, and watch them, they will naturally release.

That is why the Buddhist master Tilopa said, “You are not bound by appearances. You are bound by clinging. Let go of your clinging, Naropa.” Equally, we might say, “We are not bound by the appearance of our emotions. We are bound by our clinging to them.” In other words, the mere arising and experiencing of emotions is not what binds us. What binds us is our craving toward them, or our fixating upon them. Our efforts to let go of our difficult emotions may have been mistaken, because we think of them as “bad” and tried to free ourselves of them. However,

whatever problems we may have with them are really rooted in our fixation. We may have tried to free ourselves from the emotions, when it is really the fixation itself that is our enemy. Release the fixation and you will be able to let go of the emotion. Do it slowly. As mentioned before, try to release half, then half of that half, and so on. Our ability to relinquish them will gradually develop in this way.

One of the most difficult aspects of this is letting go of dormant or hidden emotions, feelings that we have suppressed or blocked. Before we can let them go we must first see what they are, which we do through watching the mind. However, the process of looking into the treasure chest of suppressed feelings tends to stir up a lot of thoughts. Since those emotions are blocked, we will not be able to access them easily and therefore will not discover much at first. A better approach is to ask ourselves questions about them such as, “What suppressed emotions am I storing? What am I suppressing at present? Are there emotions I am currently trying to suppress? What means am I using to suppress them? What kind of environment triggers these repressive responses in me?”

At some point we can investigate the past to see if we can find out which emotions we have been suppressing and when the process of suppression began. Eventually, we should be able to arrive at a more experiential understanding of our blocked feelings. When we connect with our own suppressed emotions experientially, we are often better able to release them.

Western psychological methods are particularly strong in the investigation of suppressed emotions. We can incorporate whichever of these methods we find helpful into our practice of the Buddhist path. These two systems are not necessarily contradictory. Good support from therapy of this kind can be very beneficial. At the same time, there is a great benefit to investigating one’s own emotions first hand. It is important that, ultimately, we draw our own conclusions about our emotional state and health from our own experience. Once we are able to see our emotions clearly, we will be able to work with them with confidence. What does this mean? We release them at last. We do not try to stop them. Without solidifying them, we let whatever we feel arise; we let it be whatever it is; and we let it go.

When we put these methods into practice, it becomes easy to see how the preceding two steps of “mindful gap” and “clear seeing” help us to finally release our emotions. If we have properly practiced the steps of “mindful gap” and “clear seeing,” some degree of releasing our emotions will have taken place already. In the end, however, to become truly happy and truly free, we just need one final little piece to add to the previous ones--we also need to let go of the “let-goer.” In other words, we also have to be free of the fixation on the person who is letting go.

This is a long process and it should be done slowly. When you begin to let go of the let-goer, you are working with the fine traces or the “scents” of the emotions. When you attempt to let go of the one who lets go, you are working with and transforming the causes and conditions of emotions at a very subtle level.

In brief, from a Buddhist point of view, the three points of “mindful gap,” “clear seeing,” and “letting go” are the most essential ones in working with the emotions. The first is related to calm abiding meditation, while the latter two are related to insight meditation. The quality of stillness

in calm abiding meditation helps us to create the mindful gap, while insight meditation helps us to clearly see the emotions and eventually let them go.