The Dharma Handbook

Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen

Commentary by Tashi Nyima

Revised Second Edition

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The Dharma Handbook, formally known as The General Commentary on the Doctrine (Tib. *Bstan sta spyi 'grel*,), is a prayer composed by Kunchen Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen (1292–1361) that systematically summarizes the entirety of Buddhist doctrine. In compact form, The Dharma Handbook offers beginning and advanced practitioners an opportunity to hear, contemplate, and meditate on the Three Cycles of the Buddha's teaching.

There are personal Root Lamas, and there are Lineage Root Lamas. Root Lama is a term that refers to the teacher who has contributed the most to our understanding of the Dharma. Sooner or later, usually retrospectively, we understand who our Root Lama is, although we may not know at first. Root does not mean beginning or original here. The Lineage Root Lama is not necessarily the first Lama of a lineage or in one's personal experience.

Dolpopa, who was the fourth Abbot of Jomonang (the first Jonang Monastery), is considered our Root Lama because of the strength, clarity, breadth, scope, and influence of his instruction. He composed The Handbook as a simple way for all Jonangpas to share a common view. That is why it is such an important text.

This commentary was spoken during Sunday lectures over the course of a year at Nying Je Ling, and inevitably contains various reiterations of important topics. The editors have chosen to maintain the written commentary as faithful to the original as possible.

I wish to express deep gratitude to my Lama, Kyabje Tashi Norbu Rinpoche, who imparted the oral transmission and extensive explanation of *The General Commentary on the Doctrine*. I am also extremely grateful to Dr. Cyrus Stearns, who in 1999 published **The Buddha From Dolpo**, including a translation of the text presented here, which has proved very valuable. Although wherever there was a difference in interpretation, I have followed my Lama's informal oral translation, Dr. Stearns' publication constitutes a momentous contribution to Buddhism in general and the Jonang Lineage in particular. I pray that the blessings of the Omniscient Dolpopa and the Lineage fall abundantly on Dr. Stearns, his publishers, and collaborators, and encourage the kind reader to refer to **The Buddha From Dolpo** for an excellent biography of Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen and two translated texts.

I also wish to thank Elizabet Sterner, Wendy DeOre, Dan Cook, Rachel Krantz, Jeffrey Tower, and Ernesto Boleaga, who recorded, transcribed, edited, and formatted this text, and to the Great Middle Way Buddhist Association for sponsoring and distributing **The Dharma Handbook**.

Finally, I thank the scholars, artists, and illustrators whose work is included in this educational, non-commercial publication under the provisions of Fair Use, as stipulated in Section 107 of the Copyright Act.

mangalam
Tashi Nyima

Reproducing Dharma texts, dedicating, and distributing them;
studying, reading, remembering, and explaining them;
reciting them aloud, contemplating, and pondering them:
these ten activities bring merit beyond measure.
—Maitreya

The Dharma Handbook

Root Text of the General Commentary on the Doctrine

bstan pa spyi 'grel

Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen

Reverence to the Lama, reverence to the Buddha,
reverence to the Bodhisattvas, again and again!

1. I respectfully prostrate and take refuge at the stainless lotus feet of the Dharma Lords, the excellent Lamas, the manifest forms. Please grace me at all times with your great love.
2. I bow at the feet of the permanent, stable, eternal, precious Dharma Lords, the Lamas possessing the Four Reliances, who spontaneously perform all-pervading enlightened activities and clarify the absolute, the unconfused definitive teaching.
3. I bow at the feet of the Lamas who carefully teach that all conditioned entities are impermanent, unstable, changeable phenomena —like a mountain waterfall, like a cloud, like lightning, and like dew on a blade of grass.
4. I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach that the nature of suffering is the same for the entire three realms —like being caught in a pit of fire, or a vicious viper's mouth, or like a bee circling inside a pot.
5. I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach that people who cling to the impure body as pure are the same as ignorant children who like and desire a vase of vomit beautified with ornaments.
6. I bow at the feet of the Lamas who cause sentient beings who feel attachment for cyclic existence to feel revulsion and sadness toward the impermanent and the impure, and teach them the Four Truths for entering the path of empty and peaceful selflessness.
7. I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach that all phenomena merely arise from conditions, without any self, agent, soul, or creator, and are like a dream, an illusion, a mirage, or an echo.
8. I bow at the feet of the Lamas who clearly teach that objects appear to be external, but are merely the habitual propensities of mind, and that even mind, intellect, and consciousness are mere names, mere designations, just emptiness like space.
9. I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach that the aggregates of form, sensation, perception, formations, and consciousness are like foam, water bubbles, an illusion, a mirage, or an echo, and who teach that the sensory bases are the same as an empty town, the senses the same as vicious vipers.
10. I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach that all the phenomena of existence and cessation are birthless and ceaseless, free from going, coming, and remaining, without extremes or center, each and all empty of essence.

11. I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach that, like a lamp within a vase, the treasure of a pauper, or the unborn princely son of a destitute woman, Buddha Nature —luminosity, the Truth Form— exists within the sheath of the relative, incidental aggregates.
12. I bow at the feet of the Lamas who carefully distinguish, "All imagined and dependent phenomena are nonexistent, but the fully established true nature is never nonexistent," imparting what transcends existence and nonexistence, and eternalism and nihilism.
13. I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach, "All relative phenomena are merely the dependent origination of cause and result, but the self-arisen absolute transcends dependent origination," clarifying the difference between primordial awareness that arises from conditions, and what is self-arisen.
14. I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach, "All outer and inner phenomena are merely the confusing sphere of ignorance, but the Other is the true nature, self-arisen primordial awareness," drawing the distinction between consciousness and primordial awareness, cyclic existence and cessation, and the two truths.
15. I bow at the feet of the Lamas who distinguish and teach, "The relative three worlds are just an exaggerated, confusing appearance, while the absolute three worlds and the Buddha Nature are an indestructible, unimagined, unconfusing appearance."
16. I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach the intent of the Dharma Wheel of the Four Truths, the Dharma Wheel of No Characteristics, and the Dharma Wheel of Certainty in the Absolute.
17. I bow at the feet of the Lamas who, with the nectar stream of the Three Wheels in sequence, clean the three coarse, subtle, and extremely subtle stains to obtain the sublime jewel of the Truth Form separated from stain.
18. I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach people who accept external objects that everything is Mind Only, who teach the Middle Way of No Appearance to those who are attached to mind, and who teach the Great Middle Way of Perfect Appearance to those who accept no appearance.
19. I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach inferior disciples the Dharma of cause and result, who teach those who adhere to existence that everything is empty, and who teach the Buddha Nature of luminosity to those who accept nothing.
20. I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach the Vehicle of the Hearers to people of inferior faculties, the Vehicle of Solitary Realizers to those of middling faculties, and the sutra and mantra paths of extraordinary cause and result in the Sublime Vehicle to the great.
21. I bow to you who care for disciples with the Three Wheels in sequence, and especially the Swift Path, just as parents care for infants, adolescents, and young adults according to their development.
22. I bow to you who also teach the Three Wheels in sequence, and especially the Swift Path, according to the character of disciples, like assigning work to an inferior, middling, or superior child, according to character.

23. I bow to you who teach that the Buddha Dharma of the Three Wheels in sequence, and especially of the Swift Path, is to be approached in succession, like climbing to the top of a three-storied mansion.

24. I bow to you who teach the cleansing of the Buddha Nature by the Three Wheels in sequence, and especially by the Swift Path, just as three layers of stain on a precious stone are cleansed in succession by a jeweler.

25. I bow to you who teach that Buddha Nature has another cause and result. The other cause is the luminous form of emptiness, and the other result is immutable great bliss, spontaneously self-arisen.

26. I bow to you who teach that many various names —such as Secret, Great Secret, Element of Space, Universal Matrix, Source of Phenomena, Lotus, Womb, Lion Throne, Lady of Selflessness, and Fierce Sublime Ignorance— have one meaning: Emptiness.

27. I bow to you who teach that the many names of precisely That —such as Indestructible Drop, Life-Drinker, Gathering, Restraint, Wonderful, Great Compassion, Primordial Buddha, and Enlightenment Mind— have one meaning: Great Bliss.

28. I bow to you who teach that many names —such as Priest of the Buddhas, Life, Ruler of Time, Closed Circle, Indomitable Hero, Destroyer of Illusion, and Hidden Assembly— have one meaning: Unity.

29. I bow to you who teach that united, indivisible, of one taste, indestructible, self-arisen primordial awareness, the Primordial Buddha, is present in all as thusness with stains, like the all-encompassing sky, and exists as the universal ground.

30. I bow to you who teach the Swift Yoga, the Perfection of Wisdom, the Ultimate Yoga, the meditation of the Great Seal, and the Branches as the Path, the method for freeing precisely That from the sheath of the stains.

31. I bow to you who teach that, by the sublime method of the path, what is present as the ground is merely actualized as the result, a stainless thusness with all stains removed, like the sky free of clouds, dust, smoke, mist, and eclipse.

32. I bow to you who teach that the assembly of the non-conceptual primordial awareness of immutable luminosity destroys the sheath of stains on self-arisen primordial awareness, and that the absolute Truth Form accomplishes excellent benefit for oneself.

33. I bow to you who teach that a special feeling of great love for those wandering without understanding creates the assembly of merit that accomplishes benefit and happiness, fully produces the excellent, relative Forms and accomplishes excellent benefit for others.

34. I bow to you who teach that, after fully perfecting a sea of prayers, fully maturing a sea of sentient beings, and fully purifying a sea of Pure Lands, one dissolves into the culmination of perfection.

35. I bow to you who teach that, because of prior impetus, benefit to others will spontaneously occur in all directions, at all times, without effort and thought.

36. I bow to you who teach that the ultimate Dharma wheel is the final wheel, the ultimate Vehicle is the great way, the ultimate great way is the Vehicle of the Essence, and the ultimate Essence is great bliss.

37. I bow to you who teach that the ultimate teaching is the great way, the ultimate great way is the Swift Path, the ultimate teaching in the Swift Path is the Kalachakra, and the ultimate Kalachakra is bliss and emptiness.

38. I bow to you who teach that the ultimate view is the great middle, the ultimate great middle is birthless and free from extremes, the ultimate freedom from extremes is natural luminosity, and ultimate luminosity is great bliss.

39. I bow to you who teach that the ultimate view is emptiness free from extremes, the ultimate emptiness is Other Emptiness, the ultimate conduct is great compassion, and the ultimate compassion is non-apprehending.

40. I bow to you who teach, for the benefit of ultimate disciples, that the ultimate initiation is the transcendent, the ultimate realization is the definitive meaning of the completion stage, and the ultimate attainment is the great sublime attainment.

41. I bow to you who teach that the ultimate assembly is sublime natural luminosity, the ultimate deity is the body of the primordial awareness of bliss and emptiness, the ultimate seal is the great seal of luminosity, and the ultimate mantra protects the mind.

42. I bow to you who teach the complete, ultimate Dharma of the ultimate ground as thusness with stains, the ultimate path as the six-branch Vajra Yoga, and the ultimate result as the thusness of the separated result.

43. By this virtue, may I and all sentient beings actualize the separated result of the absolute truth form, and, with the produced result of the two relative forms, work for the benefit of others for the duration of cyclic existence.

44. For as long as that has not been achieved, by means of the Three Wheels in sequence, and especially the Swift Path, may I always be enthusiastic in cleansing in sequence the stains on the Buddha Nature in myself and others. May all be auspicious!

I take refuge in the Buddha, the greatly Compassionate One, the savior of the world, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, of most excellent deeds in all the ten directions; and in the Dharma, the manifestation of His essence, the reality, the sea of thusness, the boundless storehouse of excellencies; and in the Sangha, whose members truly devote themselves to the practice.

May all sentient beings discard their doubts, cast aside their unwholesome attachments, and give rise to certainty in the Mahayana, that the lineage of the Buddhas may never be broken.
—Asvaghosha

Text and Commentary

ONE

I respectfully prostrate and take refuge at the stainless lotus feet of the Dharma Lords, the excellent Lamas, the manifest forms. Please grace me at all times with your great love.

These words seem at first glance like a prayer directed to external beings. However, in Buddhism, we are not calling on any person or entity to come and rescue us. No one is coming down in a sky-limousine to pick us up and carry us to *nirvana*; we must do what it takes. We must understand that Dolpopa in this prayer is using the skillful means so integral to the Dharma.

The Buddha said very clearly that the Buddhas point the way, but we must walk the path. However, part of what it takes to walk the path is acknowledging our natural human realities and limitations. In the morning when we look at ourselves, we have to use a mirror to see our form, and even then, it is only a reflection. There is no other way to see our own faces because our senses are outwardly directed. We cannot turn our eyes in; we must look forward. Similarly, to look at our own nature we have to use our senses and intelligence; we direct our attention outwardly. It is skillful means to adopt this familiar ground, instead of presenting something strange and unrecognizable.

Words too can only point the way. They are limited and cannot perfectly represent truth. Human language at best can point to the Truth, but we can never fully reduce the Truth to words. So, none of these statements is to be taken dogmatically. There is no dogma in Buddhism and there never was. The Buddha never claimed to speak the Truth, because actually, the Truth cannot be spoken. One can speak about the Truth, but one cannot speak the Truth. These teachings are pointers, ways to help us position ourselves so we can see a bit more clearly.

When we recite the phrase (which begins every text of this composition): “I bow at the feet of,” we are not calling on someone else, but instead on that aspect of our own enlightened nature, our own natural perfection that knows, sees, and is established in peace and clarity. We are not reifying anything or believing that some external being is out there. We often say that a Buddhist altar is a mirror. It is not a place where we come to worship an external, separate entity from whom we ask blessings. Similarly, the teachers and masters are reflections of our own fully manifested Buddha Nature.

The first text seems like a conventional introduction, but it is not. “I respectfully prostrate and take refuge” has layers of meaning. The first lesson to learn from The Handbook is that we must be a little humble. We cannot learn anything unless we accept that there are things that we do not know. The biggest problem with pride is that it is a hindrance to learning. Have any of us been one hundred percent right all the time? And of the things of which we were convinced at some point, weren’t some of them false? To be humble does not mean that we are “less than,” but that we are ready to accept the possibility that there is some wisdom that we still do not fully possess. Can we accept that premise? The first step in increasing our wisdom and our ability to see reality is to accept our current limitations.

A fool aware of his foolishness is to that extent wise.
But a fool who believes himself wise is truly a fool.
—Buddha Shakyamuni

Refuge means "to go to." To take refuge simply means to approach those who know. But we do not take refuge in just anyone. The pupil holds, respects, and nurtures teachings. Humility is not abasing ourselves, but recognizing that maybe there is something that we do not know yet. We are attentive, respectful, and unchallenging towards our guides and teachers, while checking the teachings against our reason and experience, applying our mind and investigating. We do not accept teachings or a teacher on blind faith without using our mind or clearly understanding what we are accepting. If we accept a teacher or teaching on blind faith, our practice ceases to be cultivation and is only superstition.

As the wise test gold against a standard, heating and cutting it, so you should accept my words after investigation, and not because of reverence for me. —Buddha Shakyamuni

Buddhism is in many countries known simply as the Dharma —meaning "that which is," that which holds reality. To check that hypothesis of life, to check any hypothesis, we must first provisionally accept a teaching and then test it. That is the scientific method. A hypothesis is accepted provisionally, and then tested. For example, in a chemistry classroom, if we decide not to believe the teacher's directions and refuse to do the experiment, then we will never know the results for ourselves. Certainly, it would make more sense to accept the directions provisionally and to test them. If we do the test properly and do not get the proper results, then we know for ourselves that the hypothesis was faulty.

So, to take refuge means simply to be willing to learn. And to understand this, we need at least to try it. We are trying to learn this lesson because we have realized at some level that life as it is generally lived is not particularly satisfactory. It is full of stress, anxiety, oppression, and suffering. Life without peace and clarity is not working out so well.

Dolpopa takes refuge —is willing to learn— at the "stainless lotus feet of the Dharma Lords." This phrase is a direct reference to the teachers and authorities that Dolpopa relied on to compose this Handbook. Of course, we do not use this type of language in the West. Firstly, as we mentioned above, the words are not to be taken literally. This phrase does not mean that we fall physically at the feet of a teacher, but that we approach the wisdom of the great masters with humility.

The "stainless lotus feet of the Dharma Lords" is a phrase that presents us with an important symbol in Buddhism. The lotus is a wonderful symbol because the flower has the peculiar quality of growing in the mud but rising above it as a clean and beautiful blossom. There is no mud on the flower, even though it is rooted in the mud. To the Indian, and later Tibetan, imagination, the lotus represents those who, out of the mire of daily toil, existence, and suffering, have been able to rise above it. However, they do not fly away. The lotus flower remains connected to the mud. That is its great virtue —it does not reject the mud but uses it to manifest purity.

Now we come to the importance of context and lineage. Words, unless we know their intended meaning, can be interpreted in strange ways. If we do not understand the intended meaning, we might as well not read it, as we are likely to become confused. One familiar example of this comes from the Christian Bible and the famous quote that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter heaven." If we imagine a sewing needle here, we will come away from this text assuming that the rich are essentially damned to hell. However, the needle in the original source refers to a narrow gate in the wall of a desert fortress, and a camel, a very stubborn animal who rightfully resents being used as a beast of burden, must be carefully led to this narrow opening from quite a far distance, especially when heavily loaded. The camel driver must be extremely vigilant to direct the

camel through the gate. The true meaning then is that those who have an abundance of resources must be very careful all the time, or they will become distracted and miss their objective. The modern reader can be easily misled in passages from ancient scripture if we do not know the original language or the intended meaning. Do we really think that we have access to someone's intended meaning by merely reading the words, particularly when those words were written centuries ago, in a setting and language very different from ours?

The Buddha's teachings, which are two thousand and six hundred years old (and exclusively transmitted orally for the first five hundred years), will not yield their intended meaning to us by a simple reading of them. The only ones who know the intended meaning are those who have received it in direct succession from those who knew the intended meaning. "Dharma Lords" is technical language for those in an uninterrupted Buddhist lineage. A lineage is a succession of disciples that can be traced back to the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama Shakyamuni. It is a direct line from one disciple to another. The "Dharma Lords" to whom Dolpopa refers here are those authorized to teach in disciplic succession. It is not someone who claims on his or her own authority to be a teacher. In the transmission of the Dharma, even some who have studied for years cannot assume that they are authorized to teach. They must be given explicit authorization by their teachers to explain a specific text. A Dharma Lord, then, is someone specifically authorized to teach the Dharma, who follows the lineage and the disciplic succession.

Among those who are authorized to teach in succession, there are a few who stand out. These are the "excellent Lamas," and Dolpopa states here that we will be learning specifically from them. There are thousands of authorized teachers in the lineage, but fewer who are excellent —who outshine, who stand above others because their teaching is so clear and fruitful. Among the authorized, we take refuge in the excellent ones. We also take refuge in "the Manifest Form." Fully enlightened Buddhas are spoken of as having three forms. The Manifest Form (*Nirmanakaya* in Sanskrit) is the physical manifestation of a Buddha. The historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, is one example of a Manifest Form.

We take refuge in those who are authorized to teach, and among those, the ones who are excellent, and among those, the ones who are enlightened. These are the teachers from whom we will be learning. Dolpopa, who was known as the Buddha from Dolpo and universally recognized as Kunchen, "omniscient," presents in this prayer a summary of the teachings of the Buddha by highlighting those teachings given to us by those who are authorized, excellent, and enlightened.

This does not mean they are transmitted from generation to generation in a rigid, formulaic way. An important characteristic of Buddhism is that it adopts a form conducive to the time, place, and circumstance of the students. There is no such thing as "original Buddhism," as some pretend. That would be a betrayal of Buddhism. Buddhism has adapted in language and expression to different times and places. The succession begins with the Buddha Shakyamuni, who had thousands of disciples. Those disciples, and their disciples after them, migrated to different places. Lineages developed and separated, not by changing the fundamental teachings, but by adapting to different cultures and languages. This is necessary. The Buddha taught impermanence —nothing stays the same. If Buddhism did not change, it would belong in a museum, and would not be practical. Therefore, while the language and some cultural aspects and practices may evolve and differ, the essential teachings within legitimate lineages share the same solid root. This makes the lineage's authorizations to teach even more important, and more essential for the learner.

The important final phrase that Dolpopa adds to this first text is: "Please grace me at all times with your great love." Love, in Buddhism, is the desire to establish all in happiness. Dolpopa does not ask to be loved personally, but asks the Buddhas, Great Lamas, and Bodhisattvas to communicate to him through the teachings the mind that wants universal happiness. When Dolpopa says that he wants to have this love, it is an elegant way of saying that he wants to learn how to want, at all times, the happiness of all

other beings. If we do not have universal compassion and loving kindness, any religion risks becoming just another ideology for oppression. The historical Buddha arose from a culture in which the dominant religion, Brahmanism, had turned into a rigid caste system that oppressed the vast majority of people and involved the domination and killing of animals. The Buddha objected to the caste system among humans and denounced the sacrifice of animals. The principles of universal love and compassion are the essential foundation of true Dharma.

We are warned not to look at matters superficially, not to take on a practice that is meant to oppress others and justify ourselves, but rather to take up the Dharma for establishing all sentient beings in universal happiness. We cannot be cutting anyone out if we want to establish universal happiness. If the Dharma does not lead to the development of this mind that does not exclude any sentient being, do not listen to it. What is the purpose of cultivation if at the end of the day we are going to exclude those we do not like or who do not agree with us? To condemn anyone, whether we agree with them or not, is not Dharma. Buddhism has always been non-sectarian. Whatever path makes us better, kinder, more loving persons is fantastic; that is the path for us. We may have different paths at different times, depending on the needed destination at the time. This is fine and may be actually necessary.

In this short first text, which sounds initially like a polite introduction, Dolpopa makes some very important points. When a great teacher speaks, every word is helpful and ripe with meaning. Every word comes from great love —the desire to establish us in perfect happiness. The true meaning of cultivation is not to put others down, but to help them rise above their limitations. If that is not our purpose, we are not engaging in the Dharma. We need universal compassion and universal love, which is wishing all to have happiness.

> *I am a friend of the footless, I am a friend of all bipeds,*
> *I am a friend of those with four feet, I am a friend of the many-footed. […]*
>
> *May all creatures, all breathing things, all beings one and all, without exception, experience good fortune only. May they not fall into any harm.*
> —Buddha Shakyamuni

TWO

I bow at the feet of the permanent, stable, eternal, precious Dharma Lords, masters possessing the four reliances, who spontaneously perform all-pervading enlightened activities and clarify the absolute, the unconfused definitive teaching.

In his first text, Dolpopa refers to the specific types of teachers from whom we should learn. First, they should be Dharma Lords, a term meaning those authorized to teach. From this group, he specifies the excellent Lamas: those who excel in the ability to communicate and exemplify the teachings. The four qualities of an excellent Lama, which were set by the Buddha, are generosity, encouragement, instruction, and example. A Dharma teacher must first be generous with the teaching, indeed with whatever the student may need (which includes not charging fees for teaching). A Dharma teacher should encourage students, focusing on strengths, not weaknesses, regardless of the mental, physical, social, or economic status of the student. Clear instruction means not only to truly represent the Dharma, but to give the teaching appropriate for the level of each student at that time. Finally, a Dharma teacher should exemplify the teachings as much as possible.

In this second text, Dolpopa further qualifies his sources as “the permanent, stable, eternal, precious Dharma Lords.” He does not refer to physical individuals here, but to the lasting nature of their Dharma instruction, which continues to be relevant today. This instruction may need interpretation and adaptation, but it is permanent. It is stable because it does not lead to mental agitation. It is eternal in the sense that we can find permanent happiness by following these teachings. It is precious because it fulfills the deepest desires of sentient beings. Dolpopa assures us that this quality of teaching from the Dharma Lords is what we will hear throughout the Dharma Handbook.

Further, Dolpopa refers here to “Lamas possessing the four reliances.” These four reliances, stated by the Buddha Shakyamuni, brilliantly describe how to receive the instruction. The first reliance is to rely on the message, not the messenger. Do not be distracted by the personality or idiosyncrasies of the teacher. The second reliance is to rely on the meaning, and not just the words. This reliance is a direct statement against a fundamentalist reading of Dharma scripture. Words can change meaning over time. If we want a good example of this phenomenon, read Shakespeare, or simply look at the English language today: does cool mean cold; does dope mean drug? Adhering to inflexible definitions of words, we may miss the mark; we need to account for their contextual meaning. The third guideline is to rely on the original intention behind the teaching, and not on personal speculation. The Buddha gave his teachings to particular groups of people in particular places and times. Each teaching was the best instruction and advice He could give at that time and place, and each advice had an intention. For example, the Buddha gave an instruction to His ordained monastics to eat only at noon. We are confident about what these words mean. But the instruction’s intention relates to Indian home life in that era. Everyone, poor and rich alike, cooked at midday. Those who were poor did not cook later in the day, and those with means would reheat their food in the evening. In India during the Buddha’s lifetime, heating food required using precious resources of fuel and building a fire, so most ordinary people did not do this more than once a day. Moreover, it was considered inappropriate to offer reheated food to mendicants. Therefore, the Buddha instructed His disciples to go begging for food only when food was readily available, so they would not inconvenience anyone. The intention, then, is that monks should not ask for food at inconvenient times. When Buddhism came to China, Buddhist teachers preserved the intention of this instruction. At that time in China, beggars were considered parasites, so monks took to working in exchange for food to avoid upsetting or inconveniencing others.

The last reliance is to rely on the totality of the imparted wisdom, not on a partial understanding of some aspect. We must constantly ask, "What is the meaning of this instruction in view of the entirety of the Dharma?" If we focus on one aspect of the teaching of the Buddha and study it apart from the rest, we can mistake its meaning and importance. For example, a teacher may tell one monk to travel and never spend more than a few nights in any one place, and tell another to remain in one location for the rest of his life. Taking these instructions out of context, we may generalize falsely. The appeal to wisdom is to look at the Dharma in its entirety for its meaning —not piecemeal, but through an understanding of the whole of the Buddha's teaching is each aspect made clear. The four reliances assure that the teachings do not harden into dogmatic, fundamentalist, non-Dharma.

The Lamas we will learn from, continues Dolpopa, "spontaneously perform all-pervading enlightened activities." This spontaneity means that their actions are without contrivance. They are not calculated for profit, effect, or to please others. Since these teachers exemplify the Dharma, the activities they perform are all-pervading and enlightened. They live according to the Dharma, and thereby "clarify the absolute, the unconfused definitive teaching." "Unconfused" means that they teach to the needs of the students, and always teach all three turnings of the Wheel of Dharma: the Dharma of Cause and Effect, the Dharma of Absence of Characteristics, and the Dharma of Buddha Nature, or Certainty in the Absolute.

Nagarjuna, as well as Asanga and Vasubandhu, establish that the Three Turnings (of the Wheel of Dharma) have a single intention.
The First Turning describes the relative; it is taught in accordance with the way things appear. There is no proclamation that what appears has true existence within the analysis of how things are. Therefore, these relative teachings are not false.

The Second Turning refutes all relative phenomena of samsara and nirvana, but whether Sugatagarbha (Buddha Nature) exists or not is never presented or examined at all. Therefore, the First and Second Turnings do not contradict the Third.

In short, the First chiefly describes the relative. In the Second, there is only half the definitive meaning: the lack of true existence of the relative, but not the true existence of the absolute. The Third Turning perfectly establishes the definitive absolute.

> *The examples of appropriately selected medicine for a specific patient and how children learn gradually to write letters illustrate this progression. If the First Turning were to teach "All dharmas are permanent," that would contradict the Sutra of Katyayana. If the Second Turning negated the absolute, that would contradict the Sutra Requested by Maitreya. The sutras and treatises then would have mutual contradictions.*
> —Taranatha, the Ornament of the Great Middle Way (Zhentong Madhyamaka)

Dolpopa assures us in the very beginning of the source of this teaching, so we can have confidence in its completeness and authenticity. He describes the Lamas from whom we will learn throughout this work. Having these teachers, we can trust that the teaching will be reliable and beneficial, and we will be at peace.

> *Better than a thousand-word speech of empty words is one pregnant sentence, hearing which one feels peace. Better than a thousand-verse poem of empty sounds is one stanza, hearing which one feels peace.* —Buddha Shakyamuni

These verses were meant to be recited daily at Jonang monasteries to remind those studying what they have studied and to enlighten those monks not given to study. Not all monks are studious, and some prefer to serve or to make art. The Sangha has always accommodated the different tendencies of different people. Those not given to profound study of the texts need to understand what it is that they are doing, and those who are studious need to be reminded that what they are studying today is not the totality. This Dharma Handbook was written with that purpose in mind. We only put things into practice when we have confidence that what we are doing is an actual remedy and of benefit. That is why many Buddhist teachings begin with statements about the reliability of the teaching. Many sutras begin with long lists of those present and extensive details about the setting. To the people of the time, these details attested to the importance and validity of the teaching.

The purpose of Buddhism is not to discuss philosophy or metaphysics. The Buddha gave us the way out of our existential predicament, and the way out was shared in words, because that is how we communicate. But it was not meant for us to just throw the words around like children playing with a balloon. Whatever little bit we understand, we are meant to practice. Many know that the Buddha said not to accept something simply because it is written or traditional or even because the Buddha proclaims it, but to first test it against reason and experience. Then, if found beneficial, we accept and practice it; if found not beneficial, we leave it aside.

> *Don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, "This contemplative is our teacher." When you know for yourselves that, "These qualities are unskillful; these qualities are blameworthy; these qualities are criticized by the wise; these qualities, when adopted and carried out, lead to harm and to suffering" — then you should abandon them. Thus was it said. And in addition to this it was said.*
>
> *Now, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, "This contemplative is our teacher." When you know for yourselves, "These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted and carried out, lead to welfare and to happiness" —then you should accept and practice them.* —Buddha Sakyamuni

The West is infatuated by this teaching to the Kalamas because it seems to validate our desire not to accept anything, to be our own teachers, and to have a mental free-for-all. However, we must understand the intent, the setting, and the audience of each teaching. The Kalamas were a people who had been exposed to at least ten different major teachers and were utterly confused about what was right and wrong. They approached the Buddha to clarify specific, conflicting ideas that these other teachers had imparted. The Buddha replied as He did because He was authoritative but never authoritarian. We tend to forget the part of the quotation in which the Buddha says that after testing and finding a teaching beneficial, then we must follow it. Once acknowledged, it is essential to put these teachings into practice, not just to say, "That's really nice, that's really cool." There are precepts we need to follow. There is love, compassion, rejoicing, and equanimity we need to cultivate. We must actually do something. It is not something superficial, for fluttering around. Do not settle for "Dharma Lite."

> *Like a beautiful flower full of color but without fragrance, even so, fruitless are the fair words of one who does not practice them.*
> *Like a beautiful flower full of color and also fragrant, even so, fruitful are the fair words of one who practices them.* —Buddha Shakyamuni

My Lama, Kyabje Tashi Norbu Rinpoche, often said that there may be many boats suitable for crossing to the other side on the shore of a river. Check them and make sure they are sturdy, their passengers are virtuous, and the rowers know how to row. But once we choose a boat and it takes off into the river, only a fool would start jumping from boat to boat. Those who do will end up in the water. There may be cases in which we decide after a while that we are in the wrong boat. In that case, we can request a rescue boat. But we do not jump midstream into another boat simply because it seems more interesting. There are some boats that never leave the shore, they are anchored; if we notice that we are in one of those, we need to find another boat. We must put the teachings into practice. If we stay on this shore, we will remain stuck. Dolpopa tells us that the teachers he relies on behave in a particular way, and they clarify the definitive meaning. They do not remain on this shore, but give us the means to move forward in our cultivation.

We do not automatically change into what we want to be. It takes effort and persistence. Patience is an important practice, with three levels. Patience with others is first. Other beings give us the opportunity to practice loving kindness and compassion. The next is patience with ourselves. Sometimes we think that we have overcome something, and suddenly there we are, back in the same hole. Patiently climb out and move forward again. The third level of patience is with the teaching. If we only hear things that we want to hear, we are not hearing the true Dharma. Many people do not want to grow; they want to coast. If we do not hear something that challenges us, perhaps we are in a boat that is anchored to the shore. The teacher cannot be afraid to challenge students. A true teacher must not be afraid to teach something the students may not like. There will be times when the Dharma shows us aspects of ourselves that are not so nice, but a responsible teacher and a responsible student are patient with the Dharma.

This Dharma Handbook is a treasure. In the beginning we are told that it is reliable and trustworthy. Let us then add it to the motivation that we already feel to cultivate the Path. Let us add the certainty that this text will help us on the Path.

THREE

I bow at the feet of the Lamas who carefully teach that all conditioned entities are impermanent, unstable, changeable phenomena —like a mountain waterfall, like a cloud, like lightning, and like dew on a blade of grass.

After explaining in the first two verses that we are going to hear the definitive Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha as transmitted to us by the excellent, fully enlightened Lamas, text three contains the first direct instruction. Dolpopa begins by saying that he bows at the feet of the Lamas who "carefully teach." Careful teaching is always important but particularly here, because if we are careless in teaching impermanence, we may slide into the extreme of nihilism or nothingness. Dolpopa carefully specifies, conditioned entities. A conditioned entity is one brought about by the agency of causes and conditions. So Dolpopa is not stating that all entities are impermanent, but that all *conditioned* entities are impermanent —an important distinction. Conditioned entities include our bodies, our minds, our concept of self, and basically almost everything of which we can conceive. A conditioned entity will always be within cause and effect or karma. The unconditioned will be discussed in a later text.

Conditioned entities are both external and internal objects. In Buddhist terminology, "objects" refers to any object of perception: a thing, a person, an animal, an event, a situation, a memory, etc. Whatever we can perceive is an object of perception. These are all impermanent and unstable. One of our perceptual mistakes is that our sight (and indeed, all our senses) is so deficient that we cannot perceive slow and minute changes. A growing child, for example, will not perceive changes occurring daily in her own body, but a relative who visits infrequently will notice many changes. We are incapable of seeing minute changes, yet, based on this sensory incompetence, we ascribe stability to the objects of perception. Isn't that amazing? We look at a building and think it will stand forever, but if we had greater sensory acuity, we would see it decomposing in front of our eyes. The blooming of a flower, shown dramatically in time-lapse photography, is imperceptible to us; the bud and petals appear motionless to the human eye.

Unfortunately, we have blind faith in our perceptions. Blind faith in religion is a small problem compared to the blind faith we place on our senses and our opinions —"I saw it, so I know that's the way it is." That is blind faith. We are not capable of seeing the minute changes, the decay that is happening at every moment, including our own, daily aging. Right now, we are dropping dead cells by the thousands and millions —do we see that? Our error, then, is compounded. We do not see, and we ascribe stability and permanence on the basis of this deficiency. Because of our limitations, we deny impermanence. Dolpopa points out that our deficiencies create the illusion of stability, of permanence, and that illusion then feeds our blind faith in our deficient senses. We think, "I saw that yesterday, and I see it today, and it's the same. I am confirmed in my opinion: it is stable and permanent."

So "unstable" means that things do not remain as they are, and "impermanent" means that they will not last forever. Besides being impermanent and unstable, Dolpopa tells us that all conditioned entities are changeable phenomena. He is referring to our experience of phenomena; that the way we experience something is never fixed, but is continually changing. When we encounter an object of perception, immediately one of three feelings arises: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral (more accurately stated, neither pleasant nor unpleasant). Those are the only three possibilities.

> *"Pleasant" is that which one would like to feel again. "Unpleasant" is what one would like to get rid of when it is present. "Neither pleasant nor unpleasant" is when neither of these two desires occur.* —Vasubandhu

Our feelings about all conditioned objects will change, sooner or later. That which we like will stop being pleasant to us. That which we dislike will stop being unpleasant to us. A food we once detested may become tasty. Things that were once neutral will become either pleasant or unpleasant. Some things that were once dear to us, are now neutral. What was important when we were younger is no longer important, and many things that were totally unimportant at one time are quite important now.

> *The three realms of existence are like a cloud in autumn;*
> *the birth and death of beings are like a dancer's movements;*
> *and a being's life is like a waterfall, or a flash of lightning in the sky*
> *—it never stops even for a single moment, and once it starts,*
> *it goes inevitably to its conclusion.* —Buddha Shakyamuni

Nothing conditioned can last forever; it is constantly decaying; and our experience of it is constantly changing. To help our understanding of the state of all "conditioned entities," Dolpopa offers some images, as did the Buddha Shakyamuni earlier.

"Waterfall" is a name we give to an event, to drops of water falling —and thereby we objectify the event. The waterfall does not exist. There is water falling, but the concept of "waterfall" results from our inability to see it in slow motion or in its smallest details. We look at the waterfall, and in our minds have a concept that there is a waterfall, but it is simply a series of water droplets falling. The waterfall image makes the point that, because our senses are limited, we impute concrete existence to an event and call it a thing. The next example, "like a cloud," is an excellent one. We ascribe powers to clouds that they do not have, such as an ability to cover the sun. Clouds may cover us, but they cannot cover the sun. This image reminds us that what we perceive is tied to our perspective. We wrongly ascribe qualities to things that they do not have. The cloud image makes the further point that our perspective determines what we see. Our perception depends on where we are positioned. For example, clouds do not look the same from the ground as they do from an airplane. From an airplane, the cloud is not covering the sun, it seems to cover the earth.

Lightning is powerful, impressive, and captures our attention, but how long does it last? It is very brief. Lightning is one of the natural world's most evident examples of impermanence, of instantaneous appearance and disappearance. The final image is that of dew on a blade of grass, which evaporates the moment the bright sun comes up. This example is not alluding to impermanence, or perspective, or rapid decay, but to the fact that all conditioned entities are subject to other causes and conditions. The dew is caused by condensation due to conditions of temperature and humidity. But causes and conditions change, and then so do effects. As soon as the sun comes out and changes the conditions, the dew is gone.

Dolpopa provides these examples to give us a fuller understanding that all we experience is a conceptual elaboration, like a waterfall. We impute a static existence to that which is an event. Then, we define it based on our perspective, a perception limited to our line of sight, like looking at clouds. Moreover, if we do not have a mental category for something, we do not see it. The word "recognize" connotes that we identify something only after having "cognized" it before. Thirdly, all that we perceive is extremely fleeting. Our incapacity makes us think that many things are stable and permanent. Lightning, however, is easy to see as ephemeral. Our lives are like lightning, but we think we last a long time. To a 400-year-old turtle, our lives are brief! It all depends on our attention span.

Finally, like the dew, all conditioned perceptions are dependent on causes and conditions that are constantly changing. We have a conceptual and perceptual incapacity. Our perception of an event is completely subjective. This understanding is not meant to paralyze but to relax us. We can avoid becoming so invested in being right. While we must act on the basis of our perceptions, we should live

with the awareness that these perceptions are conventional: they may be functional and to some extent workable, but they are not True. How many of our arguments are about who is right? Having to be right is a big part of our suffering. No one is actually right. We cannot be. The moment we understand that, a big weight is lifted. Not only do we not have to be right, we cannot be right. Therefore, we can just ease up.

The concepts in this text must not be mistaken for nihilism. When Buddhism teaches that things are impermanent, conditioned, and unstable, human minds tend to conclude that there is no truth or existence to anything at all. But acknowledging that we have false, subjective views about things and cannot perceive how they truly are does not mean they do not exist. What we conventionally think something is may not be true, may be an appearance, but it is something, not nothing. We may be unable to figure out precisely what, but does that allow us to deny it? A fish does not see water as I see water. Water is not actually as I perceive it. But that does not mean that I can live without it. As long as we are sporting these bodies and these minds, we must live within conventional reality. In our conditioned, conventional reality, cause and effect is the overriding, overarching, absolute law. There is no other. All appearances are ruled by cause and effect, even if they are impermanent and unstable. The rules for playing the game we are in right now, our human existence on this plane, are very simple. There is only one rule: cause and effect. If we generate the cause, we will experience the consequence. That is the rule. Pretty simple!

Nihilism reaches the conclusion that nothing is true, nothing matters, nothing has any meaning, so we can ignore the rules of conventional reality and invent our own, and do whatever we want. This usually results in extremely selfish behavior — "grab as much as possible"— and everything breaks down. But those who claim, from their abstract conclusions, that nothing is true and nothing matters suddenly believe differently when one demands that, since none of this is real, they should gladly hand over their money! Nagarjuna says: "*Because their view of voidness is unskilled, those with little wisdom are brought low."*

We may conceptually understand the state of conditioned existence: that things are not as they appear, that they are impermanent, unstable, changeable phenomena, but our behavior must be based on the law of cause and effect. We must leave both extremes behind, that of eternalism (everything is as it appears) as well as nihilism (nothing exists). There is a wonderful text called The Middle Beyond Extremes by Arya Maitreya. Finding our way beyond extremes is a completely different way of looking at reality. It means acknowledging that there is ultimate reality and there is also conventional reality and that there are two truths, absolute and relative. Buddhism clearly makes the point that neither should fall by the wayside. We should not believe everything our senses tell us, nor be carried away by all that our reason tells us, because reason can be as defective as our other faculties. In Buddhism, the mind is a sense consciousness, with its object of perception being thoughts and memories. Everything we said about senses being limited, unstable, and changeable, is true of the mind. Our opinions are no truer than our other sense perceptions.

Understanding the middle beyond extremes is why the great teacher Padmasambhava said, "*Though your view be as high as the sky, your conduct must be as fine as ground flour*." Because we are all conditioned entities, if we want to experience wholesome consequences in our lives, we must put in place wholesome causes. Very often, we just want to change the consequences, but first we must change the causes and conditions, and only then the consequences will change. Change the causes and conditions and we change reality. Unwholesome actions lead to unwholesome consequences, so if we do not want the consequences, we had better refrain from the unwholesome actions. Sadly, we often want happiness without its causes. We want to avoid suffering but we want to enjoy the causes of

suffering. We want happiness, but we do not want to put in the effort for happiness. But we must put in the effort to create causes of happiness to have happiness.

We have much more agency over our lives than the dew on the grass. Our opinions and conclusions don't have to be upheld. We have made ourselves believe something is true; do we wish to continue that, or change it? It is our choice: we can literally change our mind. We have the choice to change our conduct and our perceptions. When we do that, the consequences will change— which is great news! That is the beauty of the law of karma. Just one rule! If we understand karma, then everything else is easy to understand. If we want to be happy, try to make others happy. If we want others to love us, be lovable. If we want others to help us, be helpful. If we want others to speak well of us, speak well of them. If we want kindness, be kind. It is straightforward.

FOUR

I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach that the nature of suffering is the same for the entire three realms; like being caught in a pit of fire; or a vicious viper's mouth; or like a bee circling inside a pot.

This text, like all these teachings that come from the Dharma Lords, the excellent and enlightened teachers, contains the core essentials of Buddhism. These core teachings as presented by Dolpopa are meant to take us succinctly from the beginning through all three turnings of the Wheel of Dharma. The essential topic in this text is the First Noble Truth: the nature of suffering in the three realms.

The concept of the three realms has several different connotations. In this case, Dolpopa refers to the realms of desire, form, and formlessness. The human realm exists within the general realm of desire, as do five other realms: the realms of the gods, demigods, animals, ghosts, and hell beings. Although there are subdivisions, all these beings are included in one general realm, where desire is the motivating force. What these beings desire may differ, but the fact of desire is always the same. The second realm, which is "above" the first, is that of pure form. This realm is difficult for us to conceive of because we have no experience of what it may be. A helpful analogy is that, in the form realm, qualities are expressed as form just as some mathematical concepts are best expressed in geometrical forms. In the realm of form, there is no personality, just the qualities expressed as form. The motivating force in the realm of form is positive karma, which eventually runs out, and the formless beings usually descend into a lower realm. The third and higher realm of formlessness is even more subtle —there is no form or activity— just a very clear awareness. But this state is also not permanent. Its sustaining force is also positive karma, which will eventually be exhausted.

A simpler understanding of the three realms is that the realm of desire is the one we experience; the realm of form we can barely imagine; and the formless realm is beyond our imagination. The most beneficial way to think of the three realms is simply that there are realms that are inferior to ours, similar to ours, and superior to ours. When you read Buddhist texts, you may run into these categories, but otherwise, they are not terribly important for us at this point. What is important is the thrust of the teaching, which is that, while the degree may be radically different, the nature of suffering is the same whether the realms are inferior, equal, or superior to ours.

The nature of suffering is of three kinds, and each is illustrated by one of the examples given in this text. The first, usually referred to as the suffering of suffering, is "like being caught in a pit of fire." This image evokes a type of suffering that every being clearly can identify as painful, whether it is physical, emotional, or mental pain. Dolpopa equates all three of these types of pain to being in a pit of fire —if you are burning, you know you are burning. The word "caught" implies that this pain is inescapable. All beings in *samsara*, in this world of duality, will experience the suffering of suffering. In fact, one of the first things that most of us do when we are born is to cry. Everything outside of the womb feels very rough to a baby. The word, suffering, is perhaps not the best translation of *dukkha*, the Sanskrit term. A word that comes closer to *dukkha* is, dis-ease. In lack of ease, we can include such things as hunger, thirst, and fatigue. These are also the suffering of suffering, and we cannot ignore them, or they can kill us.

The second kind, described as "a vicious viper's mouth," is the suffering of change. We do not look forward to facing a vicious viper's mouth. This analogy is apt because it includes anticipatory suffering. We can see the viper's open mouth and are fearfully waiting for what will happen next. Similarly, in our lives we are plagued by the anxiety that the good things we possess and experience will be lost or will turn into their opposite. We are always waiting for the other shoe to drop, and inevitably it will. The double problem with the suffering of change is that the good things turn into their opposite or cease to exist, and then we miss them.

Most snakes only attack if threatened, but like every other animal that has been subjected to human abuse, some develop a constant state of anger against humans. This is the vicious viper. It is not one that will only bite if disturbed. This snake is out to get us. We know that change is inevitable, and we are constantly afraid. At the height of enjoyment, most people will say, "I wish this would never end." The anticipation of returning to work is probably the worst part of vacation. Everything that we enjoy will either turn into something unpleasant, or come to an end. In the human realm, this suffering of change is worse than the suffering of suffering, because we suffer the viper twice, both before it bites and while it is biting.

The third example, "Like a bee circling inside a pot," refers to the suffering of conditioned existence, the cycle of *samsara*: birth, disease, aging, and death. The Buddha said in the Udaya Sutra:

> *Over and over, he tires, and he struggles;*
> *over and over, the fool goes to the womb.*
> *Over and over, he is born, and he dies;*
> *over and over, they bear him to his grave.*

However, we do not have to accept the doctrine of rebirth to understand the cycle of *samsara*. In this lifetime, we go through cycles over and over. Most of us live a series of routines. Even those who are retired from work still follow a routine. We go to sleep each night and wake up each morning, we shower or bathe, we prepare food and eat several times each day, our clothes, possessions, and environments must be repeatedly tended to, etc. Then we begin the same cycle again the next day. Due to this monotony, we try to entertain ourselves, put some "spice" into life. If life were all that enjoyable, we would not seek out distractions and entertainments or plan vacations and holidays. Whether viewed from the scope of this one life or of many lives, the pattern of constant repetition is present. Most of our activities are repeated —day after day— like a bee circling inside a pot.

This view of the nature of our lives may seem pessimistic, but it is not. A pessimistic view is one in which there is no relief, and that is not the Buddhist view. Rather, it is realistic, and realism is what is necessary to develop a strategy for life. Many people accuse Buddhism of being pessimistic because the First Noble Truth is the truth of suffering. However, living in La-La Land will bring more suffering than accepting reality. If one expects things to work out and they do not, that is much worse than knowing from the outset that it is not going to work. People who expect unrealistically that their love will last forever, for example, will suffer much more than those who understand that relationships can be uncertain. The idea that things are better than they are leads to deeper suffering and greater frustration.

I recently worked with some children at an elementary school. It was Halloween, and most of the little girls in costumes were princesses (one was dressed as Darth Vader; and she will go far). They were very cute, but the idea of being a princess is a setup. They are not all going to have princess lives. Unrealistic expectations about the world are the worst approach. A realistic approach, seeing that things are not as good as we hoped for and not as bad as we feared, gives us more options to act in reasonable ways to both reduce and avoid much suffering. If we have a problem, we must pay attention to the problem or we will never solve it. Much of our self-inflicted suffering can be avoided and eliminated. This is the good news about suffering. The Buddha also said in the Udaya Sutra:

> *One whose wisdom is wide as the earth is not born over and over,*
> *for he's gained the path of not becoming.*

It is also good news that we have a human birth. Although there is the same nature of suffering in all three realms, the quantity of suffering can be radically different. There are realms in which the quantity of suffering is so overwhelming that beings there have no opportunity to practice cultivation. But within the human realm, it is possible to have what is called a precious human birth: the right combination of

suffering, opportunity, and inclination to cultivate and to put a permanent end to suffering. We look for a solution when something hurts, and in the higher realms, there is less suffering and thus less motivation to look for a solution. We can have, in the human realm, the right amount of motivation and opportunity, but many who possess both of those things still lack the inclination.

The teaching that Dolpopa imparts to us here is that the nature of suffering is the same wherever we are. This idea is very important because we are under the common, human illusion that if we just tweak or change a few things, everything will be okay. We hope for more money, or love, or fame, or knowledge, believing that some adjustment will solve all problems. This belief is an illusion —the nature of suffering is the same everywhere. Just look around. The people that seem so happy from afar turn out not to be so happy when we see them up close. We can make our lives better, but they will never be perfect, and that is the trap that catches many sincere seekers. Unfortunately, there are some less-than-honorable teachers who sell the idea of creating perfection. There are those who sell paradise at death, and those who sell prosperity here and now. All the great Buddhist teachers will agree that our motivation is to reduce our suffering. But to eliminate suffering, we must go beyond the idea that we can simply adjust the dials. Adjusting the dials might reduce the quantity of the suffering of suffering and the suffering of change, but the suffering of conditioned existence —birth, disease, aging, and death— is inexorable.

> *I know I will age; I cannot escape aging. I know I will become ill; I cannot escape illness. I know I will die; I cannot escape death. In everything I love, there will be change and separation.*
> — Buddha Shakyamuni

Remember that Buddhists do not stay stuck on the first Noble Truth. After that, we figure out in the Second Noble Truth the causes of suffering: wrong views and afflicted emotions that lead to craving. The wonderful Third Noble Truth gives us the possibility of the cessation of suffering, and the Fourth Noble Truth gives us the path to that cessation. The real solution is not to try to eliminate the suffering in this realm, but to eliminate the realm itself, the state of mind of *samsara*. We will not avoid the three types of suffering, but we can understand that this is the nature of this realm. I repeat, the ultimate solution is not to eliminate suffering within this realm, but to eliminate the realm altogether.

Buddhism is the only tradition that says we ourselves can end our own suffering forever; we do not need someone else to come and magically end it for us. In that sense, Buddhism is a realistic tradition. Yes, there is suffering, but we can do something about it, even end it completely. If we go to the doctor feeling unwell, but she tells us there is nothing wrong, we still have a problem. But if we go to the doctor, and she tells us what condition we have, the cause of our condition, and the treatment for that condition, then there is a path forward to feeling better. The Buddha offered the full treatment, and the prognosis is that we are going to be perfectly healthy. That is why He is known as the Great Physician. The Buddha said that if we are inside a house and the house is burning, it is not pessimistic to see the smoke and flames and look for an exit. There is little point in considering new window treatments or redecoration in a burning house. We must realize that there is a problem, and find our way out.

When we consider the three types of suffering, we are in a better position to develop compassion and sustain our motivation to work towards our enlightenment. The mixture of suffering that we experience is different for everyone, depending on our karma and on time, place, and circumstance. Some may think they are not suffering at all right now, which simply means that the suffering of suffering is not presently acute, but the other types of suffering never go away. Suffering is always present in *samsara*. The manifestation may vary, but the nature is the same. We must not look away from suffering. The First Noble Truth invites us to look straight at it. To look at our suffering gives us motivation on the path, and to look at the suffering of others allows us to generate compassion.

Buddhism teaches that it is our duty to eliminate suffering, our own and that of all other beings. To truly accomplish that goal, we need enlightenment. Compassion, the wish to relieve the suffering of others, is a great motivator, because sooner or later we will conclude that we lack the capacity to eliminate the suffering of others. How many times have we tried to help, and it has not worked? We do not lack the desire; we lack the skill. We can improve our own lives a great deal without perfect enlightenment, but if we want to have spontaneous compassion, the ability to reduce or eliminate the suffering of others, we need complete, perfect enlightenment. Right now, we can feed the hungry and try to give shelter to the homeless, but that does not solve their suffering of change or of conditioned existence. To address the whole problem, particularly the third type of suffering, we need perfect, complete enlightenment.

> *Abandon wrongdoing. It can be done. If there were no likelihood, I would not ask you to do it. But since it is possible and brings about blessings and happiness, I do ask you to abandon wrongdoing.*
> *Cultivate doing good. It can be done. If it brought deprivation and sorrow, I would not ask you to do it. But since it brings blessings and happiness, I do ask you: Cultivate doing good.*
> —Buddha Shakyamuni

FIVE

I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach that people who cling to the impure body as pure are the same as ignorant children who like and desire a vase of vomit beautified with ornaments.

We are in love with our bodies. Most of what we do in life is take care of the body: we put it to bed; we cover it up; we wash it and dress and decorate it; we feed it, we check its appearance to make sure it is attractive, we massage and pamper it. The rule for most people is to take care of Number One, and this is the body. The Dharma does not ask us to disdain the body or harbor negative feelings towards it. When Dolpopa refers to the body as impure, he does not mean that it is something that should be rejected but rather that it should be viewed realistically. What is purity? It is that which is free from corruption. In the strictest Buddhist sense, pure is that which is free from decay, free from suffering.

The body is not free from suffering; it is subject to birth, disease, aging, and death. All of us will become familiar with the impurity of disease, aging, and death. If we cling to the impure body as pure, it is the same as children enamored with a fancy vase full of vomit. This very strong image is used because our attachment is so strong. We must recognize that if we place our hopes, desires, and aspirations for happiness on the body, we will be frustrated and defeated. The mortality rate is one hundred percent; it does not end well for anyone. If the body is where we place our hopes and aspirations, it cannot end well.

We like to pretend, as a society, that illness, aging, and death are not here. We hide them away. We put the sick into hospitals, the aging into institutions, and the dead into funeral homes. People are in denial of birthdays, of disease and wrinkles and physical limitations. When we ask someone, casually, how they are doing, we expect the response to be, “Fine, thank you.” Any other answer is impolite and jarring. We do not look at aging, disease, or death. Many of us are striving to look young and healthy, even if we must tan with paint, surgically stretch our sagging skin, and implant gastric sleeves. We are overly focused on the body, thinking it is central to our happiness.

If we fall for this lie, we will suffer more than is necessary. This teaching is not about denying or disdaining the body, but about rejecting a false view of the body. Look at how this false view affects us: how much time, effort, and money do we waste taking care of our bodies and the bodies of others, hoping that it will make us happy? If what we expect in any relationship —friends, family, partner— is that others contribute something to us, what are we contributing? Happiness does not come from outside of ourselves; no one else can provide it for us, and we cannot provide it for others. If we need someone to complete us, what we bring to the relationship is a deficit. If we bring an empty sack of need, that is not a good platform for a very healthy relationship.

Looking for happiness in our bodies or in others is not the answer. Instead of focusing on this “vase of vomit beautified with ornaments,” we need to be sure we are focusing on our minds. We need to get away from the idea that if we are not getting happiness from our body, we are deprived. The body is matter. Matter is heavy. Heaviness resists movement. The body is most satisfied when it is immobile, fed, and soothed. Do we really want to attach our sense of happiness to what amounts to a baby who constantly needs to be fed, cleaned, and pampered? This attachment to the body leads to behaviors that are problematic and undermine health. When the body is the ruler of our awareness, when the body is our main consciousness, we fall into feeding it indiscriminately and giving it intoxicants and experiences that are not beneficial. Moreover, the body gets bored quickly and is often in a state of rejection and discontent, wanting something different. When it is quiet, it wants action; and when it is moving, it wants to rest. How often can we say we are perfectly fine, and how long does it last?

Everything is temporary. We eat until we are satisfied, and how long does that last? We can drink until our thirst is quenched, but how long before thirst returns? We can sleep until we are rested, but how long will that restfulness last?

We dedicate too much time to the body, neglecting the aspects of ourselves that can bring us happiness. That is the real loss. When we put our attention, effort, and time into obsessing over the body, we are neglecting the cultivation of the mind. The problem is our primary attachment and identification with that body as if it were the self. Yet, many who have lost some physical capacity learn to develop other qualities and actually become more potent, not diminished. Those who age wisely often feel better as they age and would not change their current state, even if it is physically limited, for their previous youthful exuberance. Youth, with its attachment to the body, is not "wasted on the young," as some believe. It is a dead-end obsession that needs to be outgrown.

For happiness, we need to transform the mind, not pay endless attention to the body. If we do not focus on what is important, nothing from outside is going to help. Without cultivation, without developing our own inner happiness, the partner will not do it, the house will not do it, the job will not do it, and winning the lottery will not do it. We should renounce the things that will never produce happiness; renounce the things that continually produce suffering. Do not expect others to do the impossible. For starters, do not expect loved ones to make us happy. Release them of a burden they cannot carry. Renounce the false idea that anyone or anything is responsible for our happiness. It takes less effort to make ourselves happy than to make someone else make us happy. Do not expect anyone else to fulfill us. We have full control over whether our life is full of love or not. When our heart is full of love for others, we have love. The need for love in our life will not be fulfilled by others. We do not need someone to love us; we need to love. Love is a verb —it is not something we get. What we think we want, finally, does not exist. Attachment is the desire that others make us happy. Love is the desire that all be happy.

There are many helpful practices to bring about this transformation of the heart and mind. One helpful practice is meditation, but there are many different practices to transform the mind, including recitation of texts, prayers, and mantras. One of the most important Buddhist practices is to make the Definitive Aspiration. It is definitive because we make the determination that, come what may, the only thing worth having is enlightenment. With enlightenment, all other problems are solved. Without enlightenment, all other problems persist. In Buddhism, we do not plead with some external entity to come and rescue us. We call forth aspects of our awakened, enlightened nature, reinforcing our compassion, our protection, our purification, our resilience, our dedication. Making the Definitive Aspiration does not mean that we do not want pleasant relationships, or happy children, or a supportive life partner, or sufficient resources, but that we understand our priorities.

Why does Dolpopa particularly choose the ugly image of vomit? He does not mean to shock but to point out that so many things we do, we have done before, and they did not make us happy. Vomit is something that we have consumed and regurgitated. And yet, unpleasant as it is (regardless of how wonderful the original food was), we keep doing it. If we threw it up, it was because it did not agree with us, but instead of giving it up, we try it again in a nicer package. That is the vase with adornment. What we are getting from it is more of the same thing that was unsatisfactory before. It was a disaster last time, but we try it again, indeed over and over. A similar image that is often used in Buddhism is "chewing the chewed."

Dolpopa likens us to "ignorant children," as the Buddha also frequently does, not to put down children, but because most children have not developed the capacity to understand that actions have consequences. In the Buddhist perspective, an adult is defined as someone who has the capacity to

understand and consider the consequences of his or her actions. Childishness, in Buddhism, is not considering the consequences of our actions.

Whether we are adults in age or not, if we are unable to sufficiently consider the consequences of our actions, we are childish. If we keep expecting what did not work in the past to work now, we are being childish. Einstein said that to keep applying the same procedure and expect a different result is insanity. The Buddha was kinder in merely calling it childish. As adults, we begin to consider how our actions will affect ourselves and others. We notice the suffering and know that we do not want to repeat it. Then we start asking the important question: "What is the cause of my suffering?"

When we look deeply at this question, we may see the answer lies in our feeling of separateness from others. It is foolish to think that we can isolate ourselves from what happens to others. That is like saying: "I am the flower on this rose bush, all the water and sun should be given to me; nothing for the rest of the plant." If we do not care what happens to the well-being of others, we cannot be happy. There is no independence; there is only interdependence. This idea is amply explained by modern science —there is nothing that happens that does not affect everything else. If all are connected, how can the interests of one part be more important than the interests of others? As soon as we acknowledge this dynamic interconnectedness, we can see that striving for our own supremacy is ill-advised. We cannot isolate ourselves from what happens to others.

> *Everything in life happens due to various causes and conditions coming together. Interdependence reveals the profound implications of this simple fact. It shows us that everything that exists is a condition that affects others, and is affected in turn, in a vast and complex web of causality. As part of that web, we ourselves are a condition that impacts those around us.* —Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje

The easy way to learn the lesson of interdependence is to practice the Dharma. The difficult way is what we are doing right now: poisoning our own air, water, and earth; enslaving, torturing and killing billions of animals every year; dropping bombs all around the world in the name of peace and freedom. Cruelty to other humans, to the lives and habitats of other sentient beings, is not a sound platform for peace and happiness. Exploitation has been the way of so many empires in human history. And those who have revolted against those empires, claiming to oppose the oppression, become the next oppressors, because they share the same wrong views of separation and supremacy. The solution is not political. The solution is personal. The only revolution that needs to happen is what our great teacher Vasubandhu, called "revolution at the base." The base is our false consciousness, our views of separation and supremacy. Once we think that our own happiness is most important, we become attached to what we find pleasant, regardless of the consequences. We push away all that we find unpleasant, regardless of the consequences. And we remain indifferent to everything we do not think concerns our cocooned, separate pleasure. Unless we can recognize these essential wrong views and afflicted emotions, we will never be able to solve our own suffering.

Buddhism does not ask us to put aside our interests. On the contrary, Buddhism asks us to recognize where our true interests lie. It is not about sacrifice but about rationally identifying and then pursuing that which causes the greatest happiness and eliminates the most suffering for ourselves and others. The idea that we must choose between benefiting "me" and benefiting "others" is an artifact of the wrong view of separation. The choice is between favoring the false self, "me," and benefiting ALL beings. No one is excluded from the Buddha's loving-kindness and compassion, not even "me." Ultimately there is no separation; what we do for others, we do for ourselves. The true benefit that we accumulate for ourselves is also a benefit for others. For instance, when we cultivate peace in meditation, we develop greater clarity, and that puts us in a position to refrain from agitating and confusing everyone else, which is a great contribution to society.

The Buddhist path is not difficult. It is a path of removing obstructions. It is not that we need to develop perfection; perfection is already there. Our true nature is enlightened and has all the qualities of enlightenment. The moment we dismiss the veil of artificial separateness and supremacy, and the veil of afflicted emotions arising from that, our true nature remains. To uncover it is a much easier task than starting from scratch and trying to build a false perfection that does not exist. Do not look for it outside yourself. Another great teacher, Jesus, said "The kingdom of God is within you." Your enlightened nature with all its qualities is already present. It is inside, but covered. This is the real source of lasting happiness.

Please do not desire a vase of vomit, no matter how ornamented. A vase of vomit refers to things that we have done before that have not made us happy. We already tried those things, and they did not sit well with us; we threw them up. Do not adorn them and think that this time they are going to be delicious. Once we have tried something and it does not work, going back to it does not make sense. The more we repeat it, the sooner we are tired of it and reject it. Refuse to be misguided by the ornamentation, and look at the consequences of each act, remembering that acts include thoughts, words, and physical deeds. If we just pay attention and ask, "What is the natural consequence of this thought, of these words, of this deed?" we will have become adults.

> *All conditioned things are impermanent.*
> *When we see this with wisdom, we turn away from suffering.*
> —Buddha Shakyamuni

SIX

I bow at the feet of the Lamas who cause sentient beings who feel attachment for cyclic existence to feel revulsion and sadness toward the impermanent and the impure, and teach them the Four Truths for entering the path of empty and peaceful selflessness.

The fundamental instruction in the previous text is that childish beings repeatedly seek the things that cause suffering by simply adorning them differently. We are adept at creating the illusion that even though something has never worked before, this time it will be different. We believe that we will be lucky the next time; that is chewing the chewed. In text six, Dolpopa pays homage to the Lamas who can correct this childish behavior. Notice his choice of words: not "who teach" but "who *cause* sentient beings…to feel." It is one thing to talk about what does not work. But the true Lama labors and makes every effort to convey not only the conceptual understanding of the uselessness of these worldly endeavors, but to touch the heart of the listener who comes to feel the truth of what is said. There is a type of feeling that is supported by wisdom; it comes from knowing, but knowing alone is not sufficient. The message needs to connect on a deeper level for us to change our behavior.

> *All of samsara's victory and defeat, joy and sorrow, only alternate; nothing whatsoever endures. Pleasure and wealth, no matter how exquisite, are futile to pursue. All activities other than the sacred Dharma are therefore pointless deeds and do not transcend the wheel of misery.*
>
> *For these reasons, practice a teaching that is of true benefit for the future, namely, the sacred Dharma that brings deliverance from the three realms of samsara.* —Jamgon Mipham Rinpoche

Dolpopa bows to the Lamas who make us feel that attachment to cyclic existence is not beneficial. Counterintuitively, these Lamas also make us feel "revulsion and sadness." To have revulsion is to know that something is not good. Sadness arises from compassion for others and ourselves when we realize that we are continuing to spend our resources, effort, and knowledge pursuing that which cannot bring us happiness. We feel revulsion and sadness for "the impermanent and the impure." "The impermanent" refers to all the phenomena of duality. "The impure" is everything that is compounded. Pure in this context does not have the meaning of clean, but rather of something that is not a mixture — as water is pure when it is one hundred percent water, when it has no additives, no impurities. Everything that is compounded has parts; it will break down; it is inherently unstable. Our bodies are compounded, and therefore, they break down. Our houses are compounded, and that is why, when we return home, we may find that something that was perfectly fine when we left, now is not working. Our cars are compounded, and they break down. Relationships are compounded, and they break down. Our memories are compounded, and they break down.

Revulsion does not mean disgust or hatred in this context, but the desire to turn away. The origin of the word is the same as revolve: to turn. We turn away with sadness, not with an air of superiority. It is typical of human beings to reform ourselves and then look down on those who are still doing exactly what we were recently doing. Instead of looking down, we must recognize with sadness that the others are us, and we are them. Whatever it is that we are looking at with disdain, we have done it or could do it. Those whom we see causing suffering to others are also suffering themselves, and increasing the causes of suffering for themselves. It is very easy to feel sadness and compassion for the suffering of those we label as victims, but very difficult to feel sadness and compassion for the perpetrators. We want to punish the perpetrators and think it is a righteous thing to feel animosity towards them. But the perpetrator would not be a perpetrator if he or she were not suffering. Happy people do not harm others.

If we do not understand the cause of suffering, we will perpetuate it. If the response to violence is violence, it will only prolong the violence. If the response to a perceived hatred is to hate and to create more animosity and blame in the world, we are not going to reduce suffering but increase it. The sentient beings who are the victims of an atrocity are, of course, worthy of compassion and should be helped as much as possible. However, if the perpetrators were to be touched by compassion, the result could be greatly beneficial. The victims are not necessarily doing anything wrong; the perpetrators are the ones who need to change. The solution is to remove, not increase, the causes of suffering. If they are suffering from hatred and cruelty, the solution is not to push them further into these states, but to eliminate them. The Buddha said very explicitly, animosity is not conquered by animosity. It is not possible. You do not put out a fire with flammable liquids or solids.

> *Hatred does not cease by hatred at any time;*
> *hatred ceases by love. This is the law everlasting.*
> —Buddha Shakyamuni

Dolpopa tells us that the solution is "to teach the Four Truths for entering the path of empty and peaceful selflessness." We must understand deeply, with our hearts and our minds, the Four Noble Truths: that there is suffering, there is a cause of suffering, there is cessation of suffering, and there is a path to the cessation of suffering. We need a firm foundation to stand on, otherwise, when we turn away with revulsion, in what direction will we move? We can, for instance, move away with revulsion and turn further into negativity. The Four Noble Truths give a direction for us to turn that leads away from suffering. They teach that there is suffering and a cause to suffering. Suffering does not just randomly happen. We often refuse to take responsibility for our actions. I know it is not popular to say this, but no one who is in this world of *samsara* is an innocent bystander. We have all been generating causes of suffering throughout countless lifetimes. Unless we own our actions and the consequences of our actions, we will always blame others for our suffering. Blaming others is not only dishonest, it turns us into permanent victims. If others are the cause of our suffering, then it really does not matter what we do. If this is our view, we have lost all control and given it to others.

The First Noble Truth explains the three types of suffering and why they are pervasive. We need to understand the causes of suffering, and we need to understand karma, which is the essence of the Second Noble Truth. Karma is not just a simple idea like, "what goes around comes around." The true meaning of karma is that we own our actions and the consequences of our actions. Everything that happens to us has a cause, and the cause belongs to us as well. The Third Noble Truth is not just that there is an end to suffering, but that the reason for the end of suffering is the truth of Buddha Nature. Beneath all the delusions, wrong views, and afflicted emotions, there is natural perfection. The Fourth Noble Truth is about how we unveil that perfect nature, which leads to "entering the path of empty and peaceful selflessness." Selflessness means to give up the illusion of a separate self. It requires what Vasubandhu called a "revolution at the base." Through this revolution, we stop thinking of ourselves as separate, independent, and permanent, and begin to recognize instead interdependence and equality. We are all connected. When we recognize that the suffering and happiness of others is also our happiness and suffering, that is the solution. When we see equality instead of superiority and acknowledge that we are not exceptional and privileged, and our interests do not come first, that is the path of empty and peaceful selflessness. Without that selflessness, there is no peace.

We can see a great deal of suffering around us, and we can also see the causes of much of it. Unfortunately, we are like frantic people trying desperately to run around and catch all the beings jumping headlong into suffering. Clearly, we cannot even begin to catch everyone! To really help, we need the capacity of the Buddhas; we must become enlightened. We must have the capacity to say and exemplify the right thing at the right time to the right recipients. Those are the qualities that make a

great teacher. This is what Dolpopa says here. But help must be accepted voluntarily. The Buddhas do not come to force enlightenment on us, but to make it available and desirable. We must cause sentient beings to “feel” revulsion and sadness. One who has not felt it cannot share it, and that is why experience and genuine compassion are necessary. Self-righteousness is a poor replacement for compassion. True compassion is never aggressive.

These teachings are given to us in a language that is sometimes not easily accessible, but they are always extremely practical and direct teachings from the heart. In the Jonang lineage, Dolpopa is referred to as The Buddha of the Three Times, and those of other lineages refer to him as *Kunchen*, omniscient. He shares with us his direct realization of truth. He also respectfully and humbly begins each text by saying that he bows at the feet of those who have taught these truths. To bow at the feet means that we accept not just the information we receive but the goodwill and the blessing that are offered as well. The change of heart needs to lead to a transformation, not just in thought but in feeling. It is a revolution at the most basic level, and at the most basic level we are not intellectual creatures. If we were, we would always be reasonable. We are fundamentally animals —the word comes from *anima*, as in “animating principle”: we are moved by our desires. The human realm is about desire and struggle, craving and striving; unless we change what we desire, no transformation will ever happen. We have so much knowledge already, and we must turn it into a feeling of revulsion for the impure and the impermanent, and eagerness for peace and selflessness, which is the way of compassion.

SEVEN

I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach that all phenomena merely arise from conditions, without any self, agent, soul or creator, and are like a dream, an illusion, a mirage, or an echo.

This text presents the second most distinctive characteristic of the Buddha Dharma (the first is dependent origination). The belief in a self —an agent, an independent, permanent, substantial entity, in some religions called a soul or spirit, or just "me" —is very pervasive. The Buddha led us to understand, not simply believe or accept on faith, that what we call the self is not substantial, not independent, and not permanent. What does this mean? What is this self? We typically identify, and oscillate between, two options: the self is the body, or the self is the mind. And if we select the mind, we can be subtle, analyzing and splitting the mind further into different functions: conscious, subconscious, unconscious, etc.

If we really analyze this thing we call the self, we cannot find it anywhere, and certainly not as something substantial, permanent, or independent. Let us first consider the body. We think we know what the body is, but the term "body" is just a word, a label that we apply to a compound made of parts, and these parts are labels themselves for other compounds. What is the body? Is the head the body? No, the head is the head. Is the torso the body? Are the legs or arms the body? Are the hands the body? This type of analysis can be continued for every part of the body. We conventionally say that we have a head. What is the head? A skull is there; is the skull the head? Are the ears, or lips, or eyes the head? Or is the term "head" a construct, a label, rather than an actual entity? All names are just labels. Modern science agrees with this analysis, all the way down to the molecular level. At the molecular level, what are we? We are whirling charges of electricity, a great deal of space, and continual motion, at times colliding with other charges.

There is nothing stable in this world. Nothing. That wall that we see as solid is only so according to our perception. Science tells us that a wall is mostly space, and its components are not stationary but in constant movement. All atoms are constantly moving; there is nothing that is stable or substantial. The appearance of rigidity and solidity comes from our perceptual limitation. Our eyesight is so slow that we cannot perceive the charges, the tiny particles, the energy, and the movement. It is our mind with its limited senses that sees a continuum, a substance. Gaps are not registered. Our minds even tend to smooth over gaps to make things appear stable, constant, and label-worthy. Films used to be made of thousands of separate pictures that moved so fast in front of a light beam that we took each character as a single creature gliding through various scenes, when in reality it was hundreds of different pieces of film sped before our eyes so rapidly that they created the illusion of a single constant actor. What appears to us to be a single moving creature in an animation film is created by thousands of little drawings, all different from each other, which are then sped up. We see fluid movement because our visual sense is so slow that we cannot perceive the different moments of which the movement is comprised. Similarly, if we read a long novel, we get the impression of a character living a fluid life, when actually there are only various separate scenes, and our minds fill in the gaps to make it seem continuous.

The body is an idea, a label. If someone in an accident loses a hand or a foot or even part of the head, would that mean she no longer has a body? No, the label is unaffected. When you start taking parts out of a car, one by one, when does the car stop being a car? And when a car is being assembled, when does it stop being a bunch of parts and become a car? If I have a bundle of sticks, how many do I have to remove before it ceases to be a bundle? How many trees do you need to have a forest? How many branches are pruned from a tree before it is not a tree? All that we think we can quantify as solid are really terms, names, words. This is not scary; the scary thing is to believe what is not true. When we

offer prayers of gratitude to the great teachers and Lamas, we praise them for seeing “what exists as existing and what does not exist as not existing.” What is worse or scarier than believing there is something there when it is not? If a safety net is not really there, we better not believe one is.

If we can’t even define what the body is — if we can’t find it anywhere, because it is a concept, a construct — then all these questions are moot: Is the self the same as the body, or different from the body? Is the self in the body, or outside the body? Does the body have a self, or does the self have a body?

The mind is as inconstant and changing as the body. The mind that we have right now is not the same mind we had an hour ago. The fact that we have had further experiences in the past hour means that our mind is no longer the same. The passage of time changes everything. Do we think we are the same people we were yesterday, a year ago, a decade ago? Despite the way our memory recollects our childhood, if we actually met the seven-year-old that we think we were, would we recognize that child as the same as ourselves right now? There is no such thing as a permanent self. Do we have the same body we were born with? There is not a single cell in our body today that we were born with. We have had many bodies. Even the body we clothed this morning is not the same body we have this instant, because we are constantly shedding cells.

While there is no fixed self, there is continuity, just as there is continuity in an animated movie or in literature, and there is continuity in the story that we have created around the self. In fact, when asked, “Who are you?”, we only have a story to tell. Like the story in a novel, we describe a character: the background, tastes, intentions, and life events. This is a story; this is not “me.” We cannot avoid telling a story when asked who we are, because there is no “me.” There is only a story. There is a character we identify with, who looks at phenomena and thinks that she is substantial, independent, and permanent. Notice the exquisite irony of this! An insubstantial, dependent, and impermanent observer is imputing substantiality, independence, and permanence to a perception! As the observer, we are constantly changing, second by second, nanosecond by nanosecond, but we look at an object and say it is not changing. Modern science tells us that the observer changes what is observed, so we know that an object changes at the very least upon our observation. We are in the throes of change, more rapidly than we notice, and yet we look around at things and say, “Oh, those are permanent.” How can an ever-changing collection of thirty trillion whirling electrons claim that the appearances that come to it are stable? By artifice, it produces fictional continuities. A story and a character are created by bringing together experiences into a continuum with an ongoing reference point, “me” — much like an animated film brings together different panels to run rapidly before a light beam to create the illusion of a moving character. Neither is substantial. Neither continuum is real; both are artificial. Things happen; but not to “me.” That part is made up; it cannot be found outside the story. That illusion can stop.

I am not saying that we live in a vacuum, and what we sense is entirely made up. But all our perceptions are internal mental representations. And what we notice depends on our attention; when we are distracted, we are not aware of the clothes against our skin, or the car keys we hold in our hand while we frantically look for them. Please take the time to perform a thorough analysis, and to understand how we falsely attach certainty and permanence to what we momentarily notice. Do this not as a philosophical exercise, but because the cause of our suffering is accepting the unreal as real, the impure as pure, and the unwholesome as wholesome. If we have wrong views, and do not see things as they are, we will develop attachment, aversion, and indifference, which are called the Three Poisons. When we want something that we cannot have, when we get something we want but it does not make us happy, when we hate something or someone and push them away but they keep coming back into our lives, or when we are indifferent to something that should matter and it comes back to bite us (as it always does), we will suffer. It happens all the time, and it comes from this wrong view.

In this text, our great teacher Dolpopa says all phenomena merely arise from conditions. Which conditions? First, they arise from our sensory limitations. Do we actually see everything that is in this room? Do we see the atoms of air or the billions of microwaves pervading us and our cell phones right now? The human eye only perceives one percent of the light spectrum. Our eyes have three types of cones only. There are shrimps that have fourteen types of cones in their eyes; can we even imagine the colors they see? We can only see things of a certain size, not too small or too big, and not too close or too far. Those are our limitations, but there are also conditions that affect the object we look at. It could be covered, or obscured by darkness, or dust. The object is also composed of parts, and one of the main parts is the label we make for it. If we do not have a label for it, we are unlikely to even notice it. And the label that makes the biggest difference is the label "mine." If we are in a shop and a glass bowl we admire breaks when someone accidentally bumps into it, we may think it is a bit of a shame, but if we buy that glass bowl and break it at home, we will feel very differently because we are attached to it. This focus on self occurs not only with objects, but with people as well. When we hear of people dying by the thousands in another part of the world, it is a news item that passes quickly through our minds, a concept without a felt connection. We pass our indifference as philosophy: "Oh well, people die." When someone we know and care about dies, we are shaken by the tragedy. The only difference in those deaths is the label "mine."

This teaching does not mean we should become indifferent to the problems of our close friends and family. The solution or antidote to attachment is not indifference, but love. The Buddha said that we should "tremble" with compassion for all sentient beings.

> *Having abandoned the taking of life, refraining from the taking of life, we dwell without violence, with the knife laid down —scrupulous, full of mercy— trembling with compassion for all sentient beings.* —Buddha Shakyamuni

Buddhism does not teach us to become blocks of wood, but to develop compassion for all. This project is long term, but we must adopt it. If we justify a certain level of feeling for those close to us, then we can try to develop the same level of feeling for someone who is not so close. This equality is not immediately accessible, but understand that the difference we feel is not because of something intrinsic to the object. Let me use my mother as an example, whom I love dearly. However, she is not intrinsically more important, worthwhile, or deserving of compassion than anyone else's mother. If we look at all the religions in the world, the true teaching is to love ALL, not some.

> *I should eliminate the suffering of others because it is suffering, just like my own suffering. I should take care of others because they are sentient beings, just as I am a sentient being. When happiness is equally dear to others and myself, then what is so special about me that I strive after happiness for myself alone?* —Shantideva

In fact, we must love our enemies, who are also worthy of love and compassion. Love means that we desire all beings to be happy, not that we wonder what they can do for us. If we only love those who love us, that is simply business. This teaching is extremely practical because our suffering comes from believing that "this one is more important than that one." In the name of what we consider "mine," we misplace our priorities, hurt others, and end up hurting ourselves.

What we perceive is simply our perception; the qualities we perceive in the other do not arise from it, but from us. They are our perceptions, what we see, what we perceive, our intentions. It is our perception, and we must take full responsibility for our perceptions. "Phenomena" are all our perceptions, our internal mental representations of people, objects, events, situations, and times. These have "no agent, object, soul, or creator." Someone may say, "That song makes me angry" or "That car's

color is disgusting," but that song and color are intending no such thing from their side. They have no intention. Understand that we are projecting the intention. We pretend all the time that we know what another intended, but we do not. Let's be honest: we do not know half the time what we ourselves are thinking!

Once we understand that there is no intention from another that we can determine or perceive, we can understand how our perceptions are "like a dream, an illusion, a mirage, or an echo." How are they like a dream? Other people act in our dreams, and sometimes we dream of people whom we know in waking life, but after we wake up, we do not hold them responsible for those actions. We understand that it is our dream —we dreamt it. Our waking-life perceptions are like a dream because they are our perceptions. What we perceive does not come from outside. It has to do with our physical limitations, emotional distortions, and conceptual biases. We need to stop attaching importance to things that do not exist. I have very poor eyesight, but I cannot blame the world for being blurry. I cannot demand that everything clear up! It is my limitation. The human mind also has particular limitations, and the classic one, on which we base the whole discipline of logic, is that we cannot hold two contradictory ideas simultaneously. We know through other sciences such as physics that things actually can be two seemingly opposite things at once, like a wave and a particle, yet our minds cannot conceive this. We switch back and forth, saying sometimes it is a wave and sometimes it is a particle. We separate things into either this or that, and cannot hold them together. In Western thought, we keep separate and cannot conceive together matter and consciousness, or full and empty, or bounded and unconfined, or enclosed and outpouring, or giving and receiving.

The second comparison that Dolpopa gives for our perceptions is "an illusion." The difference between illusions and dreams is that dreams are usually not willful, but illusions are specifically and purposefully created, like those conjured by a magician. In this case, we are not the audience but the magician, pulling the rabbit out of the hat. We ought to know that no magic is really happening; it is a rehearsed trick. The meaning of illusion here is that we are the ones fabricating. We have made it look this way. We must take responsibility for it. We must be aware that every perception is the doing of our minds and our senses. Others see it differently. Our perception is not intrinsic to the external object or situation. It is not this way from its own side.

The next example, "a mirage," refers to how our desires and fears turn into perceptions. A mirage is usually something we desire. If we are dying of thirst in the desert, we mistake hot sand for water. What we see, and feel, and hear is subject to emotional distortion. People hear sounds that are not there when they are afraid. People see monsters in the closet. People see romantic looks from someone who may in fact be looking past them at a mural. We often perceive that people and situations are deliberately harming us when they are not. We project and see what we want to see or what we fear. It did not rain just to ruin my day. I am not that important — no one is that important.

Finally, Dolpopa likens our perception to "an echo." Does an echo produce itself? No. It must be produced by us before it returns. In the same way, the phenomena we see are our projections. We are not saying that there is nothing there. Rather, we are asserting that our mental images of them are bounced-back projections of our mind. The echo may sound different because external forces have now conditioned it, but it was our voice that produced it. We get into our own little echo chambers: our minds produce most of the words we hear, and we choose as friends people who repeat and reinforce them, so that we end up hearing only what we say and believe, and we become certain others are saying it too. In this way, seemingly unintentionally, our echoing mental voice is largely what we hear. If I were to believe what I see on my social media, then most everyone in the world is both Buddhist and vegan! This is not a fact, but I have chosen a certain number of friends, and they have chosen me, and

there is an echo effect. We are always projecting. All our perceptions are echoes. The echoes are always distorted, and always coming from ourselves.

At first when we read this text, we may think it is a comment on theistic religions, but it is not. It is about how we perceive the world. We are always ascribing: “Somebody did it,” or “Somebody made it this way.” We are constantly creating a plot, a story. Our ego, “me,” always wants to be happening, and so we continually find protagonists and antagonists and plot twists. Without conflict, the story does not advance. If nothing happens, then what is the character? Nothing. Too often, what we choose to make the story continue is suffering, not happiness. The more this character we are dramatizing suffers, the more we fortify the false self. We are not the story. We never were the story. Our job in life is not to walk around narrating the story of a character, in mostly dreary episodes, at that. That scribe is not who we are, nor is the story. When we realize that our perceptions are just that —perceptions— we can become free of sticking and reacting to them. When we own perceptions as perceptions and not facts, we will become free from wrong views, from believing that what is insubstantial is substantial. And we are free from the misguided emotions that arise from these wrong views of self and phenomena. Then we can begin to act in the world from principle rather than reacting emotionally to what is not really there.

EIGHT

I bow at the feet of the Lamas who clearly teach that objects appear to be external but are merely the habitual propensities of mind, and that even mind, intellect, and consciousness are mere names, mere designations, just emptiness like space.

If we remember this whenever we read or hear a Buddhist text, we will not become confused: the Buddha always taught from the experience of sentient beings, not from outside that experience. He never intended to explain things in the abstract, but rather as the human mind perceives and interacts with them. Therefore, the sutras and commentaries are not describing the external world; they are describing our experience of it. In that experience, "objects appear to be external, but are merely the habitual propensities of mind." Our perception is always internal. How could it be otherwise? Nevertheless, we tend to continue to believe that the things that appear in our minds are real, solid, substantial, external, permanent, and independent.

If we are not aware of something, it is not there for us. When we exit a room, nothing in that room is still there for us. When we are not aware of it, even our body is not there. If we are very engrossed in watching a movie or reading, we can be sitting in an uncomfortable position, putting our legs to sleep, and not noticing the discomfort until we pay attention at some point, or try to stand up. Until we pay attention, our body is not in our perception or awareness. It is not that our body disappears; it is simply not present to our perception.

We have a habit of looking at, smelling, hearing, touching, or tasting some things and not others. That is why Dolpopa says objects "appear to be external," but "are merely the habitual propensities of mind." Of those things that we do apprehend, we do so in ways that are shaped by our habits and biases. We have a habit of looking at certain colors, shapes, textures, etc., and immediately liking or disliking them. There are some people we do not really know, but we do not like them. There are some animals or insects that we assume are aggressive or disgusting in some way, but we do not really know them either. We bring some of these habitual propensities from our own experiences, some from our families, from the general culture, and from the media. Therefore, we are predisposed to see things in particular ways. For example, there are many people who have never met a single Muslim, yet have very strong opinions about them.

Here is the problem. Even when we come to deeply understand this teaching, we will still see things as if they were external, substantial, and permanent. We are still looking with the same eyes and the same habits of mind. According to accepted scientific fact, at least ninety-nine percent of what we perceive as solid is actually space. Even if I understand that my desk is mostly space, and that my hand is also mostly space, when I try to put my "space hand" through the "space desk", it is not going to go through. I am not going to change the innate properties of this body or the innate properties of this mind. But what can change is my understanding. That is important because so much of our suffering comes from assigning substantial, independent, permanent existence to things that do not have it, including our bodies and our sense of self. This tendency, this attachment, always leads to suffering. Things are not permanent and will not hold in the way we want them to. The truth of impermanence is not entirely bad news, however. If we have ever had a toothache or a lousy day, we know that permanence would be unbearable.

When we understand that our experience of phenomena happens in our mind, it is not an invitation to indifference. Regardless of the insubstantiality of our perceptions, suffering is real. It is not the things themselves, but the experiences that arise, that matter. The fact that mental perceptions are not permanent does not diminish the suffering that can arise because of them. Emotions —grief, fear, terror— are real. The problem, referred to in Buddhism as one of the Three Poisons, is indifference to

suffering, and suffering is real even if the situation is not. Recognizing that perceptions are merely "habitual propensities of mind" does not alter the fact that sentient beings suffer because they take them to be real. Our attitude to suffering should not be that of indolent gods who consider it all insignificant, but a motivation to practice and develop the capacity to help those who suffer and who will suffer because of ignorance. The only positive aspect of suffering is that it provides this motivation for the cultivation of compassion.

All views, all perceptions, are subjective mental representations. Clarity and rightness are not about whose view is superior or inferior. The real test of whether a view has true clarity is: How much suffering does it cause? How much suffering does it eliminate? All views are imperfect, but some lead to more suffering and some lead to less suffering. This scale of suffering is the only one with which to weigh which views are preferable. We should never turn away from the suffering of others; it motivates us to feel compassion and to want to practice so that we can develop the capacity to truly help.

> *When others suffer, it makes the heart of good persons tremble; thus, it is compassion. It demolishes, attacks, and banishes others' suffering; thus, it is compassion. It is dispersed over the suffering, is spread out through pervasion; thus, it is compassion.* —Buddhaghosa

If all our experience is a propensity of mind, we must ask the question, "Is mind real?" Dolpopa answers that question here: "Even mind, intellect, and consciousness are mere names, mere designations, just emptiness like space." Not only our perceptions but our idea of mind is a habitual tendency. Most of us think of our mind as a thing, because our idea of mind is very influenced by language. The word "mind" in English is a noun, implying a thing. We say that we can lose our mind, do we not? The word appears to stand for something real. But the Tibetan word "*sem*" that is translated as "mind" designates a process, not an entity. That language difference is one reason why Tibetans do not have such a tendency to reify the mind. Neither do Tibetans have the Freudian-based assumption that mind is an elaborate structure with many named parts and sections, designated as id, ego, conscious, subconscious, etc. In this teaching, Dolpopa clearly points out that our perception of mind is also just that: a perception.

Mind is empty, but emptiness does not mean "nothing." It means the space in which everything is possible. Space is the "field" where everything happens. If there were no space, there could be no things. Where would they be? In Buddhism, we call external emptiness "space," and internal space, "emptiness." Mind Training texts teach clearly that the mind has no color, no weight, no shape. Mind is a process, but we have given it a name, a designation as a thing, and then made the mistake of looking for an agent to be responsible for it. Instead, what arises is not from someone but due to causes and conditions. What are causes and conditions, and how are they so important and determining? The cause of the arising of a thought is another thought, along with the proper conditions for it to arise, because causes alone are not sufficient. For example, if you plant a seed where there is no soil, no water or warmth, even an extremely potent seed will not grow. There must be both causes and conditions, but no one is in charge, and there is no necessity for anyone to be in charge. If water spills on the floor, I do not have to invoke the water gods for the floor to become wet. There is no agent, which is a good thing, because then we would have to be on the good side of the one who is in charge. All our perceptions of phenomena, of self and other, arise from causes and conditions, and the greatest condition is our own conditioning, our mental propensities. That is what drives us. In Buddhism we try to realize that we have this conditioning and that it belongs to us. The good news is that our habits do belong to us; they are ours, which means that we can change them. They are also impermanent, no matter how strong they are. Everything is impermanent. We can go visit some of the strongest, largest, greatest monuments ever built on this earth, and there is not much left standing there.

Because of this conditioning, we are attached to a certain view of how things should be, which sometimes only sustains illusions. For example, some people may be young enough not to notice the

decay of the body, but eventually, it is inescapable. We suffer because we do not accept things as they are; we want things to be the way they were or the way we imagined they were. We tend to imagine that past times were better, especially the older we get. We hold on to something that we liked, or we think we liked, and we compare it to what we have now. The comparison is usually not so favorable. We can think of this tendency in another way by looking, for example, at traveling. We become upset when we have a flight scheduled, and the flight is delayed. We are attached to the idea of a certain time, and the airline is changing our plans. However, we never chose that flight time in the first place; it was chosen by the airline. We did not call the airline and tell them to arrange a plane for us at five o'clock. It doesn't work that way. What we think of as our plans were not really our plans to begin with, and getting upset is not going to change things. Our frustration comes from being attached to something that never was. If it did not happen, how real was it? Many of us spend a lot of time resenting and resisting reality, based on personal opinions of what should be. What can be adjusted: reality, or our notions of responsibility and agency? I have heard many people say, "My life was not supposed to turn out this way." Well, how else could it have turned out? If it could have been otherwise, it would have. The more we are exposed to the complexity of causation, the more we realize that getting attached to having things a certain way causes frustration and suffering.

In this text, Dolpopa tells us that it is not only the thoughts we generate that are reflections of our own propensities; it is our own view of our mind as well. What we think things are, and who we think we are, are both in the same category. It is not only that what we grasp or perceive with our minds is an artifact of perception, but that the perceiver is also an artifact of perception. The seen and the seer are both notions. If we assign permanence to either category, we will suffer because everything changes all the time. In our post-mediation prayers, we recite, with Vasubandhu:

> *All notions of subject and object, self and selves,*
> *phenomena and characteristics,*
> *are mere transformations of consciousness only.*

Everything is moving. There is nothing that is stable. This desk, at the molecular level, is a riot of movement. There are particles reacting with each other; that is all there is. Everything and everyone is vibrating. Do not ascribe solidity and substantiality to things. If we are not paying attention, things are not happening for us. That is not to say that they are not there, but they do not exist for us. "If a tree falls in a forest, and there is no one there to hear it fall, does it make a sound?" If there is no human, there will be no sound as a human understands or experiences sound, just as there is no sound for you if you do not hear it. We do not know what birds or monkeys call it, but if there is no human, there will be no sound as we understand it. It has nothing to do with the absolute reality of the tree falling, and everything to do with our perception.

Dolpopa's teaching here is not philosophical, but practical. Thought is constantly happening and flowing, but we do not have to become lost in those thoughts, or assume they are produced by something important. The point is not to give so much credence to perceptions or to the perceiver. Neither one is anything but a habit. It is all a perception, an internal mental representation, and we can change it. The idea of training the mind in Buddhism is not striving to make our minds blank. It is not about nothingness, but about identification. If an emotion arises, we need not identify with it. There is nothing substantial to hold onto. We cannot hold on to that which is flowing. We are not one with our thoughts or feelings or emotions. Everything is impermanent. We can cultivate this view by making some space, by taking a step back, by observing the mind.

NINE

I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach that the aggregates of form, sensation, perception, formations, and consciousness are like foam, water bubbles, an illusion, a mirage or an echo, and who teach that the sensory bases are the same as an empty town, the senses the same as vicious vipers.

The five aggregates are a distinctly Buddhist view of the "self." During the Buddha's time in India, there was not one monolithic view, but the dominant view was the Brahmanical view derived from the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Manu smriti. In this view, you were born into a particular time, place, occupation, and caste, and the only correct thing to do was to accept and live your embodiment properly. This system was based on the belief that all beings had a permanent, substantial, independent existence, and that this "soul" (*jiva*) transmigrated from one body and lifetime to another. An individual *jiva* was believed to take successively different bodies but remain the same soul and enjoy or suffer the consequences of previous acts. The dominant Abrahamic (Judeo-Christian-Muslim) view in the world today is not that different: whatever you are, "God has ordained." If you are poor and oppressed, "God is testing you." If you are rich and powerful, "God has blessed you."

The Buddha urged us to be introspective and take a close look at that soul, being, or entity that we believe to be independent, permanent, and substantial. He pointed out that if we really look, the only thing that we will find is five aggregates. The first is the aggregate of form: the body, which, when closely examined, is constantly changing, moment by moment. We only notice cumulative changes after a while, but change is continual, nevertheless. The body provides nothing permanent to which to attach our identity. Besides the body, the other sphere that we identify with is the mind, which the Buddha divided into four functions.

After the aggregate of form, the remaining four aggregates are grouped together as mental functions. The first of these is sensation. When we come in contact with any object, feelings arise, and those feelings are very simple: we like or dislike the object, or don't care one way or the other. The arising of feelings is unavoidable: the act of sensation. The next function is called perception. Once we have a sensation, the sensation produces in us the need to explain or justify why we like or dislike the object of perception. When we like something, the mind immediately asks: "Why do I like this?" We explain the feeling to ourselves after the fact. Such "reasons" do not produce the liking or disliking; they are *ex post facto*, after the fact. We think that we know why we like something, but in reality, we like something, and then we come up with the reasons why. In the same way, we dislike something, and then we figure out why. If we do not care, we just skip over it. That is the essence of perception. After perception comes mental formations (motivations, volitions, and tendencies), which is why we move to do something about the feeling. Once we have had a sensation, a feeling, and we've explained it to ourselves, we then have the desire to do something about that feeling. We will want to have and keep what is pleasant, push away or destroy what is unpleasant, and not be bothered by what is neither apparently pleasant or unpleasant.

The last function of the mind is called consciousness. Sensations, perceptions, and formations happen, and we are aware of them. Consciousness appropriates all the other mental faculties and refers everything to a self. It narrows awareness to self-reference. Consciousness is a problem because it is always dualistic (a subject conscious of something) and self-referential. We rarely think: "There is a car." Instead, our process is usually: "There is a likeable car…. of a nice color…. that car would be nice for me…. I want that car." It happens impulsively. Our mind automatically refers everything to "me." This mental process comes so innately to us that most of us cannot understand why others do not realize that the world is really revolving around "me!" We are usually conscious of sensation, perception, and formations, not the self-referencing function, which seems self-evident to each of us: everything is

about me. Most relationships are a negotiation about who is going to revolve around whom. Most people who have conflicts have them over who is the sun and who is the orbiting planet. “Do you know who I am?” The Buddha was the first to say that these functions are what we mistake for a permanent, independent, substantial self. These five aggregates are all that one can find when one analyzes the “self,” and they lead to suffering.

> *Now this, for the spiritually ennobled, is the painful reality: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, unhappiness, and distress are suffering; union with what is disliked is suffering, separation from what is liked is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering;* ***in brief, the five aggregates of grasping are suffering****.* —Buddha Shakyamuni

In text nine, we are first told that these five aggregates are “like foam.” How does foam arise? It arises from agitation. The more we have friction with other beings and the environment, the greater our “self” becomes; the greater the conflict, the greater the ego. Water bubbles are the next image, and their fragility is their main characteristic. If we look at people’s self-concept, we will see that the bubbles that people build about themselves break sooner or later, leaving them to feel that they have no anchor. We are identifying with a water bubble that cannot endure. That is the reason we are deeply offended by mere words. There is nothing painful about air coming from someone’s mouth that makes sound waves which tap on our eardrum and wiggle a set of tiny bones behind it. Words hurt by puncturing our bubble. We are very attached to this fragile construction.

The next example is that this bundle of aggregates is an illusion, a very important concept to understand. Stage magicians know that the illusion that fools everyone else is not real, but a trick. Someone could not be a magician if he believed the illusions he created, believing the stream of colored handkerchiefs pulled from the hat really came from thin air. We all have this capacity to generate such illusions, and we must realize that we are making it happen, and not be fooled by it. We generate our perceptions, formations, and self-reference, and project them onto someone or something else. They can be illusions we like or do not like. Others may be fooled, but we should not be. For example, some may say that they are happy because their team won, but it is not their team; someone else owns it. That projected sense of identification or ownership is an illusion, a magic trick of our own making.

In the next example, the aggregates are compared to a mirage, which is a specific kind of projection. It is an illusion produced by our strong desire for something. The classic example is a thirsty traveler seeing water in the shimmering heat of the desert sand. One sees not only what is not there, but what one would like there to be. We see both what we want and what we fear, our hopes and our terrors, even though they are not there. We constantly go from mirage to mirage, and the riskiest one is, “I am here, and I am permanent.”

The last example is an echo, which derives its aptness from the fact that it does not exist until you trigger it by making a sound. Echo does not exist independently. One should never be fooled by an echo, thinking it exists on its own. Echo is part of a process, but there is no such thing as echo until we generate the sound. To think of the echo as independent is a failure to see interdependence. We started it, we made it. We mistakenly interact with our feelings, formations, and perceptions in the same way we might think an echo exists on its own. We make up the “self,” and then we say, “I know it is there; I heard it!” What is there is a function, a process, a consequence of causes and conditions.

These examples illustrate the ways in which we mistake the five aggregates as a real, substantial, independent, permanent self. Attributing these aggregates to an assumed, permanent self is why someone, misperceiving this truth, might say, “I do everything right, but my life is miserable.” It is about relating everything to “me,” and projecting the lack of proper regard from everyone else towards this

"me," as the problem. The computer game we are playing or model ship we are building is not trying to anger us or make us miserable. We all have the tendency to project our internal images and emotions; they are not out there but rather in us. Having this wrong view leads us to accuse others of being self-absorbed, because they are not paying enough attention to "me."

> *As long as there is belief in the aggregates, there will come from them belief in a self. When there is a belief in a self, then there will be karma. From this there will come rebirth*. —Nagarjuna

Dolpopa continues by saying that the "sensory bases are the same as an empty town." The "sensory bases" are the objects of the senses: texture, pressure, and temperature (the objects of touch), form and color (the objects of sight), sound (the object of hearing), odor (the object of smell), flavor (the object of taste), and thoughts (the objects of mind). What we hear, see, touch, taste, smell, and think have more to do with us than with whatever we imagine we are describing. They may have the appearance of a town, but there is no one there because all these sense impressions are our projections. We tend to blame others or other things for our mistakes and our perceptions, but there is no one and nothing there other than our own minds.

Next, Dolpopa says senses are like vicious vipers. A vicious viper is an angry and poisonous snake. Most snakes are afraid of us and avoid us, but those we label vicious vipers do not back down and will strike. We have this belief that the senses are passive and that information, sensations, come to us. We believe a word comes to our ears, or the image comes to our eyes. But that is not what happens. Remember, the objects of the senses are like an empty town; they have no real content. It is we who provide the content. You may not notice a certain smell until someone nearby calls your attention to it. Was your nose "off" before? The senses are active and go after their object. The senses, when we place our consciousness on them, actually move toward the object, not the other way around. Therefore, if we are not interested or distracted, we do not hear or see things that are visible and audible right around us. Until our attention is focused on something, the senses ignore it. The senses go out, like a vicious viper, and actively look for objects. In a sensory-deprivation tank, the mind creates sensations. And that is what our minds do every night in our sleep: they create sights, smells, sounds, and tastes in dreams, which happen to everyone, all night long.

This analogy has been misinterpreted by those unfamiliar with the Jonang teaching, which is why we need to hear these teachings from someone who has heard it in disciplic succession. Dolpopa here does not say that we should be afraid of our senses, but that we must recognize the direction of the engagement. He makes us aware of the fact that the senses go after their objects; it is not the other way around. They even make things up. We are under the mistaken impression that we are passively and innocently waiting, and things come to us. But that is not how it happens. We are looking for them. It is we who move toward things, first mentally and then physically.

Dolpopa's analogies all point to the same truth: we are the magician creating the illusion, we cause the echo, we project the mirage and the empty town, we are the snake hunting for prey. This essential truth means we are responsible, which does not imply guilt. Responsibility means power. Responsibility is freedom. Accepting responsibility is to reclaim our true freedom; we are generating like, dislike, and neutrality. We are not passive recipients of sensations. We are making them. We are generating this aversion or attachment or indifference. No one can make us angry, mad, or happy. No one can make us feel anything, and the moment we understand that, that is the beginning of freedom. If we think that we are under the control of external persons and objects, we have ceded our freedom. Even if we are not fully in control at this moment, knowing that it is us who are doing it, is the first step to freedom. Outside things do not control us; we move toward things. Only we can turn ourselves into victims. As long as we think somebody else has the power, we will be victims. This teaching shows us how to take hold of our lives and improve our experience. This is how we do it! We claim our right, and our right is

that we are the agent. No one is doing anything to us. I am not saying that everyone out there is cooperating with us, but they have no control over our emotions. None. No one can inject us with attachment, indifference, or aversion. It is not possible. These are our emotions, our decisions.

We learn in this text the difference between the Buddha's teaching about karma and the deterministic view that was prevalent in his time. The Buddha said NO; the past is how it was. What we do now is how it is, and how it will be. No matter how things were in the past, what we do now is what is, and what determines what will be. Karma is not predestination. The true understanding of karma is freedom. We can change this; we can do this. We are already doing it —just understand that we are doing it. Each of our actions follows an intention, an aspiration on our part.

We make choices all the time; we must take responsibility for our choices. Responsibility also means accepting the consequences of our previous actions. We may have reduced our sphere of choices by previous acts. If we go outside and turn right, we have chosen not to turn left, but that was our choice. When we go to a Chinese restaurant, do not complain that we cannot order Mexican food. We made a choice to go to that restaurant, and that will limit our next choice. The sooner we accept this limitation, the sooner we can then begin to make better choices. If we do not want this outcome, we must make different choices.

Sometimes we do not know the right choice to make, but if we know that the consequence depends on our act, we are on the right track. Perhaps we will have to go through a few trials and errors to figure out how to obtain the outcome we want, but at least now we are not believing that things are happening outside of our control. Our actions are our responsibility, and the right question is always, "Is this beneficial?" That is why the first injunction by the Buddha is to avoid harm. Unless we make that choice, we cannot make any progress.

The teaching of karma is that every act has consequences. We do not have unlimited free will because we have made previous choices, and although we are free to act today according to our understanding, we are not free from the consequences of previous acts. Remember how our menu choices are limited at a Chinese restaurant; we won't get Mexican food there. Moreover, part of the consequences of previous acts is to establish the tendency to repeat similar acts. Therefore, there is a need for effort. We have Buddha Nature, but if we do not make the effort to stop indulging in certain tendencies, we may not see the change we want to see. That effort can begin when we see that a negative view we have of someone is not who they are now, but is an image we are making of them, perhaps from previous tendencies. We are not seeing who that person truly is or truly ever was. We do not have to make that image. By telling ourselves this and making an effort, we can change, see the other person more like they are, and stop perpetuating negative patterns.

TEN

I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach that all the phenomena of existence and cessation are birthless and ceaseless, free from going, coming, and remaining, without extremes or center, each and all empty of essence.

This text can be scary for many people because it sounds like it says that nothing is real. We do not claim that things do not exist, but simply that *the way they exist for us* is entirely internal. We must remember that emptiness does not mean nothingness. Emptiness means that phenomena, all the objects that appear to our perception, are insubstantial (they have no tangible existence), dependent (they do not stand on their own), and impermanent (they do not last forever). Let us look particularly at the aspect of insubstantiality. The Buddha always spoke from the perspective of our experience. What we experience, all we experience, is a mental image. Direct contact is not our experience, but the mental representation of that contact. If we were unconscious, and someone put a warm coffee cup in our hand, we would have no experience of it, even if all the nerve endings in our hand are working properly. The mind's images and concepts must be operating for us to sense "warm cup." When we are conscious, we can be looking at one thing, thinking of something else, and fail to register what we are looking at. That is why cars crash, and there are plenty of car crashes. If we do not have the mental experience, the internal mental representation, things do not register for us. That is what is meant by phenomena being "empty of essence."

Dolpopa is referring in this text to all that appears in our minds, "all the phenomena of existence and cessation." "The phenomena of existence" is *samsara* or all that arises in our perception of the world within and around us. "Cessation" refers to the mind state of *nirvana*, which is when suffering ceases. Remember we just described phenomena as internal mental representations. Whatever idea we have of *samsara* (existence) and *nirvana* (cessation), are both internal mental representations. People have many diverse ideas in their minds about what they call heaven. Most people think of heaven as a vastly improved earth. But all views of heaven are mental concoctions. Buddhism too presents verbal imagery of Pure Lands that seem to outsiders like "Buddhist Heavens." But Buddhists understand that these descriptions are symbolic and useful for humans who have only two ways of representing things: words and images. We construct these internal mental representations through either language or images, so let us understand them for what they are. We take them as aids, not as facts. Even when we see something directly, it is still our view; the image appears in our mind from our unique perspective.

Dolpopa does not equate *samsara* and *nirvana*, but asserts that our internal mental representations of both are "birthless and ceaseless." The usual human view is that things have a beginning, a middle, and an end. But that is not the case. We have ceaseless thoughts, which is something that the practice of meditation brings to our awareness. Birthless is more difficult for us to understand, because we live in a linear culture —everything has a beginning date. Perhaps the best direct experience we have of that concept is dreaming. Do dreams have an introduction? They just begin right in the middle of the action. In the same way that they pop up, they depart. Our dreams do not start where they should or have tidy resolutions. Dreams, like thoughts, are birthless and ceaseless. A dream will break off at some point, and we have ceaseless dreams during the night, whether we remember them or not.

Just as mental phenomena are "birthless and ceaseless," they are also "free from going, coming, and remaining." Our most direct experience of this freedom from going, coming, and remaining is also dreams. Where do our dreams go? Where do they come from? The other night I had a dream that a friend had filled the house with water and was doing backstrokes into the kitchen to get a glass of water! These images and ideas arise from nowhere. Where did all the water come from? Where did it go? The answer is nowhere; it did not come from anywhere and will not go anywhere. Dolpopa here

tells us that all appearances are like dreams. Our dreams and waking thoughts operate in the same way; all of it is a display of the mind. We function within the world created by our mind; that is where we are. Through this teaching, we can learn to loosen our grip and recognize the illusory nature of our experience. That recognition alone will decrease our suffering, because when we mistakenly take our perceptions as substantial, independent, and permanent, we end up developing attachment, aversion, and indifference. These three afflictions or poisons are the root of our suffering.

The central point in this text is the understanding that perceived phenomena, both of *samsara* (existence) and *nirvana* (cessation), are internal mental representations. All that appears in the mind is empty of essence: insubstantial, dependent on causes and conditions, and impermanent. What we perceive as *samsara* depends on our level of attention and on countless other conditions, and none of our perceptions is lasting. If we are not paying attention to what we are doing or where we are —for example, driving along in a car— time and phenomena can pass all around us without our awareness. We can be on automatic pilot when we are doing many things. Through our selective attention, we are co-creating our experience of the things that we have directly witnessed (*samsara*) and our ideas of things that we imagine (*nirvana*). Both are fabricated in the same way. When we think of *nirvana*, we do not use a different mind than when we think about *samsara*. Our teachers warn us not to reify either this "reality" or whatever we think comes after it. We use the same mind to generate both, and neither is exactly as we think it is. If we take our imaginings of ultimate reality as our standard, we risk disregarding and rejecting what actually is, because it will not accord with our imagination. We do this all the time, especially in our romantic relationships, where we disregard who we are with, imagining someone better or worse. When people bring their different concepts of ultimate reality into their daily interpersonal lives, what happens? —disappointment, fault-finding, and clashes. People even kill each other because they do not agree on an ideal neither of them can be sure about. The point is that these ideas are ideas, and ideas only have internal existence; projecting them outside can be harmful to us and to others.

What does Dolpopa mean by "without extremes or center"? In Buddhism we speak of the Middle Way. This is the way *beyond* extremes, not *between* extremes. The middle between two extremes is a compromise, halfway between the two. To be beyond extremes is not a compromise, but something completely different. When the Buddha first spoke about the Middle Way, he was making a distinction between eternalism and nihilism. Eternalism is a belief in an everlasting, individual entity or essence that persists through time, either reincarnating or going forever to heaven or hell. Nihilists believe that there is nothing beyond the physical matter of which we are composed. The Buddha's Middle Way is not eternalist. As Buddhists, we do not think that there is anything permanent about us. But neither do we accept that at death there is absolute cessation or nothingness. The Buddha's view is not a middle between extremes, because His position does not try to reconcile those two philosophies. Ultimately all compromises lean in one direction or another —like Goldilocks looking for porridge that is neither too hot nor too cold. The Buddha chooses not to have porridge at all, and takes an entirely new, third position. The view that the Buddha presents is that it is not a self that has absolute existence, but certain qualities are truly established: True Purity, True Being, True Bliss, and True Permanence. These qualities, not individual selves, persist ceaselessly. This view is beyond both nihilism, which supposes nothing permanent or real exists, and eternalism, which posits that individuals are real and have eternal, unchanging, permanent souls. The Middle Way is beyond those ideas. There is no individual entity to permanently stay or go.

We are human, and words and images are what we use in our need and effort to communicate. Yet reality is ineffable; words cannot contain it. We need to remember that words are just words, and not get caught up in our own descriptions. That is the essence of this text. We are stuck with using language,

because all humans think in words and images. We must not deny that, but we can disarm our own use of words and images. Language is limited, and by knowing this, we weaken the reification of views and concepts, and demystify our apprehension of reality. With human language, we can only point at reality. These teachings are like a finger pointing to the moon; we should never mistake the finger for the moon. We must be very careful with our words. For example, it is a fundamental truth in Buddhism that everything is always changing. Therefore, how can one meaningfully say what "is" if it is always changing? Yet Buddhists do use a few words, qualities, to attempt to describe ultimate reality, ultimate truth. The first is True Purity, meaning not contaminated by wrong views or afflicted emotions. The second is True Being, where being is a process, a flux, not a static entity that can be pointed to and defined. The third is True Bliss. Happiness is our natural state, but it becomes covered by anxiety and fear and other afflictions. Once there is none of that, true bliss arises. True Permanence is the cessation of suffering. Once Buddha Nature is perfectly manifested, there is complete cessation of suffering and no possibility of retrogression.

> *The Dharmakaya, the Form of Truth, is True Purity, since its nature is pure, and even the remaining imprints are fully removed. It is True Being, since all conceptual elaboration in terms of self and non-self is totally stilled. It is True Bliss, since even the aggregates of mental nature and their causes are reversed. It is True Permanence, since the cycle of existence and the state beyond pain are realized as one. It must be realized through self-awareness, it is not a realization due to extraneous conditions.* —Maitreya, Uttaratantrashastra

We must always make a distinction between *view*, which is a conceptual understanding, and *vision*, which is direct perception of Truth, unmediated by words or images. The teaching of the Buddha is a view, and that is why we are adamant in saying that it is not the only view. We do not pretend that it is. We never say *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, "outside the church there is no salvation." Buddhist scriptures, for example, use astronomical numbers so that we do not even try to have a concept of how many eons or Buddhas or worlds are being mentioned. These descriptions are purposely left vague and beyond our comprehension, like "an incalculable number of interminable eons."

In our prayer to Dolpopa, the highest praise we give him is that he apprehends "whatever exists as existing, and whatever does not exist as not existing." That is *vision*, wisdom. We ordinary humans who lack wisdom tend to project as substantial things that do not exist and fail to apprehend what does exist. We think that we are seeing an object, and the moment we capture it, we stop looking at that precise object. For example, the moment we label the chair as "chair" it becomes a generic image in our mind. We think in categories, and the categories are established mainly by negation. When we look at an object and label it a chair, unconsciously we have checked it against our memories of other forms and eliminated them. It is by contrast and negation that we come to know what things are. How do we know a cow is a cow? We know it because it is not a horse or an elephant or a dog. That is why we print black ink on white paper, otherwise, we would not know what was written. View is always conceptual, even if it is Right View. Right View, like any other view, is limited by words, concepts, and images, which cannot contain ultimate reality.

The idea in this teaching is to become aware of both the power of the mind and the pitfalls of believing that whatever appears to the mind is real. We want always to be aware that it is our perception, and that those perceptions say more about us than about any perceived object. We have so many opinions about the world and others and ourselves. None of our perceptions is exact, but some are closer and some farther away from reality as it is. The Buddha used the categories of wholesome and unwholesome rather than good and bad. What is wholesome is beneficial. In Buddhism, truth is that which is helpful, not necessarily what is "factual." If it helps, it is true. What we hold onto as "factual" is not a set fact. Everything changes, including our opinions, which will transform and shift with our

mutable minds, bodies, and conditions. Everything is a manifestation of the power of our minds. We can see things very clearly at one moment, and then suddenly something else resonates with our tendencies and we go off in another direction. That is how we humans operate, because, unfortunately, we are easily distracted. In meditation, we look at the wholesome and unwholesome thoughts —we do not follow them or fight them. We can take a step back and look at the display of the mind without engaging in it. One of the greatest female teachers in the history of Tibet, Machig Labdron, said that all demons are the creations of our own minds. Once we understand that, we can let those demons go.

> *Seeing the frightful transformations of a demonic army, the Pure Being recognizes them all as a product of illusion. There is no demon, no army, no beings; there is not even a self. Like the image of the moon in the water, the cycle of the three worlds is misleading.* —Machig Labdron

ELEVEN

I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach that like a lamp within a vase, the treasure of a pauper, or the unborn princely son of a destitute woman, Buddha Nature, luminosity, the Truth Form, exists within the sheath of the relative, incidental aggregates.

In this text, Dolpopa introduces Buddha Nature and its relationship to the five aggregates. The aggregates are what we mistake for the self —what we impute to have a permanent, substantial, and independent existence. The Buddha spoke of them sometimes as five, sometimes as simply *nama* and *rupa*. *Nama*, name, stands for the four mental functions, and *rupa*, form, for the physical body and matter. *Nama* is how we think, and we think in words. If we do not name the things we see in our imagination, we cannot think —it will just be an image without meaning. All meaning comes from name. When we want to be more explicit, we divide *nama* into four aspects: sensation, perception, formations, and consciousness. (Some Buddhist lineages do not include all four mental functions under *nama*, but such fine distinctions are not significant for our purposes here.)

Sensation is the most immediate aspect of our mental function and happens when our senses contact any object of perception. Upon contact, based on our previous experiences, a pre-conceptual sensation arises. Unless we go on to the next function of the mind, perception, this sensation remains vague and not clearly identified. For example, sometimes we feel good or bad and do not know why until we examine the sensation, or someone points out what it is. In other words, sensation is present, but it is pre-conceptual until we look at it and name the sensation using the function of perception. Perception is recognizing or identifying something. We identify both internal and external things by elimination and opposition. We think we know things in and of themselves, but we know things by what they are not. Comparison and contrast are the essence of perception.

Perception is a function, and it is followed by formations. Immediately, based on sensation and perception, a tendency arises to relate to that perception in an established way. We habitually move away from or towards certain things, and that happens without consciously making the decision. Most of our actions are reactions, and reaction is not a conscious response —it is automatic, habitual. We see the spider or the snake, and we automatically recoil. The Buddha was very clear about identifying these mental functions. It is important to understand because sensation, perception, and formations are responsible for most of our behavior, and left unexamined, can trap us in a cycle of reactivity.

The fifth aggregate is consciousness. The popular view has elevated consciousness into something desirable, but in Buddhism it is not. We use a model of Eight Consciousnesses to understand the structure and functions of the mind. The first five are the ones known to the West as the five senses. A sense consciousness, hearing, for instance, is not produced by the actual organ, or the object of the sense, or the contact between the sense organ and the object. Once that happens, you still have not perceived anything. How many times has someone said to us, “Did you hear that?” and we did not. Then, once we stop and pay attention, we hear it. Were we deaf earlier? No. Our ear consciousness was not engaged. In order to hear, the contact of soundwaves with the ear is not enough. If our sense consciousness is not attentive, it does not register. The same is true for the other four familiar senses. Perception does not arise in the organ.

There is a sixth sense-consciousness: the mind. The mind is a sense in many ways. The sense of vision perceives form and color, and the auditory sense perceives sound. What perceives thoughts and memories? The mind, the mental sense. The sense function of the mind is also shown in dreams, where the mind by itself replicates the experience of all five senses: in dreams we see, we touch, we hear, we taste, we smell. In this way, Buddhism is more realistic than western science, which theorizes that having thoughts and perceiving them is the same function. Just as a moving eardrum does not perceive

sound, having a thought is not sensing or knowing a thought. Not realizing this has been a stumbling block in the West, where the thought, rather than its knowing, is owned as "me."

The seventh consciousness is the afflicted or appropriating consciousness —what we popularly call the ego. We don't just hear; *we* hear; *we* see; *we* touch. The seventh consciousness is the one that constantly says that it is not just a perception, it is *my* perception. It is always self-referential. That is why we think everything is happening to us, when it is simply happening. The seventh consciousness is always appropriating the experience. With the seventh consciousness, the moment we see something, we attribute it to our experience. It is the consciousness of separation, a perception of distance and grasping, of relating every perception to a subject, an acquirer, a grasper, who immediately makes it about himself with attachment, aversion, or indifference. If the seventh consciousness is stopped, we can follow the Buddha's recommendation in the Bahiya Sutra:

> *Train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there is only the seen... in reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed... in reference to the cognized, only the cognized... There is no you in connection with that.* —Buddha Shakyamuni

Because of this appropriation, the receiving experience is purely personal. Things we experience do not have their own value. While it may seem that another is doing something "to me," the seventh consciousness is appropriating the experience and making it this way; it is not really the way it is. The statement, "I saw it with my own eyes!" does not make our view objective. Precisely the opposite: we saw it with our own eyes, heard it with our own ears, and thought it with our own minds. We interpreted it; we put the spin on it. What reality is for us, is our individual experience –not everyone else's experience. This means we do not actually know how it is for anyone else. We have no access. In every instance, our seventh consciousness is appropriating. Another being will experience it differently. Knowing this frees us from making wrong assumptions about what others experience.

The eighth consciousness is the repository of all our experiences. The storehouse consciousness guarantees that no experience is ever lost, even though we may not remember everything. Many things in our life have generated tendencies that we experience today, yet we do not remember them consciously. Every single experience is stored, and given the right causes and conditions, they will come up. All of us have had a thought or strong feeling and wondered, "Where did that come from?" or "I didn't know I could feel this way." Those come from the storehouse consciousness. Everything we have ever experienced is in our consciousness.

The eighth consciousness is the story of our lives, which is what we identify as "me." Whenever we ask someone to tell us who they are, they will tell a story. There is no other way to answer that question. All the labels and relationships and events that make up our lives, make up the story. There is no "me" there, only a story. That is why so many people, particularly men who tend to be so identified with their jobs, find retirement empty and often do not live long beyond it. The primary story ends, and they have identified so much with the story of what they do for a living, that when that episode ends, the body withers and follows suit. We call finding a new career after retirement, "reinventing one*self*." We think we need to invent a new self because the other self is gone. In work-driven societies, where people identify with what they do, this problem contributes greatly to the lack of respect for the elderly. Our story is basically over, and the rest does not interest anyone —we are deemed non-productive, unimportant, no longer "in the game."

The Buddhist view, then, is that consciousness is not something positive or elevated, but it is necessary. Buddhism does not advocate mental blankness. We cannot negate the five aggregates, but we can see them for what they are, rather than mistake them for a being, for a substantial entity we call "the self." The highest praise for the fully realized is that they see "whatever exists as existing, and whatever does

not exist as not existing." There is no reason to deny anything, but simply to look at things as they are. Name and form are functions. The body is a series of functions. All the mental aggregates are also functions. They are not a being (noun), but aspects of being (verb), and to claim that those functions together somehow comprise a "self" is a serious mistake. When we identify with what is impermanent, the body and all these constantly changing and shifting mental functions, we are bound to have serious insecurities. We have identified with something that is constantly transforming, decaying, and dying.

Therefore, Dolpopa helps us to understand that these aggregates are not us, not a self, but are "the sheath of the relative." By relative, we simply mean that they are insubstantial, dependent, and impermanent. Insubstantial means that everything we experience happens in our mind and is an internal, mental representation of our sense input. The relative is not ultimate because it is insubstantial. If something is not in our mind, it did not happen to us. We are not saying that the world exists in our minds, but that our experience of the world exists in the mind. All experience is something that happens in our awareness; it does not happen anywhere else. Our consciousness is selective. It cannot take in everything, and whatever it does not select, falls outside of our awareness. It is not that the world out there does not exist, but that our experience of it is limited by our conscious awareness.

As well as being insubstantial, the "sheath of the relative" is not ultimate because it depends on thousands of other factors; it does not exist independently. Our conscious experience depends on our senses, which discern only a limited range and spectrum, and are dependent on countless causes and conditions. For example, if we remove even one element, oxygen, our entire experience as we know it would abruptly end. Finally, the "sheath of the relative" is impermanent. Both our mental and physical aspects are constantly changing and flowing. Thoughts, dreams, and memories come and go. At every moment, millions of our cells die and are replaced as the body is born, develops, decays, and ultimately dies.

Everything in our experience, the sheath of the aggregates, is relative and "incidental," meaning insubstantial, dependent, and impermanent. But Dolpopa says that Buddha Nature — "luminosity, the Truth Form"— truly exists within that relative sheath. Whenever a Buddhist uses the term "exist," that is an important statement. It means that something is substantial, independent, and permanent.

Dolpopa chooses three of the nine typical examples, or metaphors, used in the scriptures to explain Buddha Nature in relation to the aggregates. The first of the three very apt examples explains that Buddha Nature exists "like a lamp within a vase." In ancient times, when a lamp was taken from one place to another outdoors, it was carried in an enclosed vessel to protect it from the wind. In such a case, the light would be shining within the vessel, but would not be visible. The first of these examples simply means that even though we do not see Buddha Nature in ourselves or others, it is always there.

The second image is the "treasure of a pauper," which is also an ancient metaphor. Imagine a pauper living in a hut, and underneath, buried and unbeknownst to him, is an immense treasure. If he only started to dig, he would be the richest person in the world, but he continues to suffer in poverty while sitting on that great treasure. The first metaphor tells us that our Buddha Nature is not visible, and this second one reinforces that idea, saying that, buried deeply, we have everything that we need and more. We must start digging!

The third metaphor involves the mythology of the universal monarch, which is common in Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain traditions. The universal monarch is not known by heredity but by some other signs. When one is finally recognized, it does not matter who the parents are, he cannot be stopped from ruling. Therefore, there could easily be "an unborn, princely son of a destitute woman." This woman is living in poverty, not knowing the tremendous power she carries within her. The power, the treasure, and the light are all Buddha Nature. Even though we may look and feel like we are impotent, we are not.

Our counterfeit impotence has been driven into our consciousness, lifetime after lifetime. Most religions strengthen this view that society also imposes on us. We have been told that we do not have power, that we are dependent victims of a cruel world, or of cruel people, or of cruel destiny, or of an all-powerful and vengeful god.

The first example means that ordinary persons cannot see Buddha Nature. The second means that few make the effort to bring it out, and the third explains that this happens because we believe ourselves to be impotent. However, Dolpopa says that this Buddha Nature "exists within the sheath of the relative incidental aggregates." We are not that story or that false identity. What we truly are is this Buddha Nature. We are not beings; we are *being*. That true existence is substantial, independent, and permanent.

That is why, when attempting to describe Buddha Nature, the scriptures very clearly and carefully give it four characteristics: True Purity, free from wrong views and afflicted emotions; True Being, completely free of anything impermanent, insubstantial, and dependent; True Bliss, completely free of the three types of suffering (the suffering of suffering, the suffering of change, and the suffering of conditioned existence); and True Permanence, completely free from arising and cessation. We have human minds, so we think of permanence as something static, but the True Permanence of Buddha Nature is different. There is no change in Buddha Nature, because all possibilities are already there; Buddha Nature is the permanence of flux, of process.

Because of the limitations of our human language, even when we posit these positive qualities of Buddha Nature, we cannot put into words what they are, only what they are not. Language is an artifact of the human mind, incapable of accommodating contradiction, let alone what is ultimate. That is why Buddhists prefer the term "non-dual," to the term "oneness." Whenever we define ultimate reality as "one," there is automatically other than one. Human language and limitations are the problem here. The basis of science and logic is: if not this, then that. But there is only Buddha Essence, not this and that.

To help us thwart our limiting logical tendency, the great Buddhist teacher, Nagarjuna, gave us the tetralemma: "Not this, not that, not both, not neither." His purpose is to show that the absolute is beyond conceptual understanding. We must not fall into the trap of defining the absolute in relative terms, because then we end up reifying our opinions. The closest we can get to describing ultimate reality is saying, True Being, True Purity, True Bliss, and True Permanence. The qualifier "True" is important and lets us know that there is false purity, false bliss, false being, and false permanence.

As long as we identify with consciousness, with the story of "me," we are on the relative plane. But our Buddha Nature is actively present as well, and any moment when we are spontaneously moved by compassion and kindness is a moment of enlightenment. It is a moment free of any calculation about what is in it for "me." A spontaneous moment of clarity is an enlightened moment. We all have many of those. The appreciation of beauty, the feeling of true love —wanting others to be happy regardless of "self," the feeling of compassion, of non-difference and inclusion— all are enlightened moments.

That is why we are often inspired by the selflessness of saints and heroes. We see in them moments of non-separation, and when we see those glimpses of Buddha Nature, we are moved. Research has shown that there are measurable changes in the brain, body chemistry, and functions like blood flow when test subjects are shown videos of this type of saintly heroism. The Buddha told us that we can feel the effect of being in the presence of the enlightened. That is why Sangha is so important. Others on the path have an actual physical effect on us, and if there is a change in physical form, there will also be a change in sensation, perception, formations, and consciousness.

We are all aspects of the same story, and each character affects other characters, and the plot as well. When we change any aspect of our story, the plot changes, which is why Mind Training can transform every aspect of our lives. Even if we make a small change, everything changes. We must let our Buddha Nature, the ultimate universal monarch, be born. We must dig a little and find our buried treasure. We must break the vessel, and the light will spread everywhere. It is not a little light. It is unstoppable; it is a boundless radiance. We do not have to let it shine; it shines whether we "let it shine" or not.

> *Pure, crystal-clear, and luminous, undisturbed and uncompounded; this, the Sugata Essence, is the nature that is primordially present.* —Buddha Shakyamuni, Samadhiraja Sutra

TWELVE

I bow at the feet of the Lamas who carefully distinguish, "All imagined and dependent phenomena are nonexistent, but the fully established True Nature is never nonexistent," teaching what transcends existence and nonexistence, and eternalism and nihilism.

What does it mean to "carefully distinguish"? We are especially cautious with terminology because it is easy to say that something "almost" means this or "almost" means that, and we end up with something that means nothing. Dolpopa was adamant that if we do not make careful distinctions, we will lose the Right View. A slight deviation in the beginning can end up being a big aberration. For example, if we make a one-degree miscalculation in the trajectory of a spaceship, it may end up in an entirely different galaxy. The same is true of mathematical calculations; if we make a small mistake in the beginning, the further along that mistake goes in the process, the larger the discrepancy will become. So, careful distinctions are very important, especially when we are dealing with our ultimate destination.

The explanatory model of the three natures referred to in this text is often discussed in the teachings of Maitreya, Asanga, and Vasubandhu. The three natures are the imaginary, the dependent, and the truly established. They explain our perceptions. Other than our perceptions, there is no other reality of which to speak, no "objective point of view." We can only describe what we see, so we are talking about the human point of view, not some all-seeing eye that hovers over reality and describes it. The imaginary nature is how we regularly perceive. It is called imaginary because it is a fabrication. This does not mean that we are all hallucinating, although in some sense we are. It means that what and how we perceive defines us more than it defines the objects perceived. All our perceptions are a function of many limitations, the first being our deficient sense capacity. We do not hear or touch or see or taste or smell all that there is to hear or touch or see or taste or smell. The second limitation is emotional distortion. If we are distracted or agitated emotionally, we perceive things that are not there and miss perceiving many things that are there. For example, if we are afraid while walking outside in the dark and see a coiled rope on the ground, we may think we have encountered a snake. Because of our sense limitations and emotional distortions of both attachment and aversion, our perceptions are imaginary. The third limitation comes from conceptual bias. If we do not have a mental category for something, we cannot even notice it. How would we recognize something that we do not know exists? In addition, our beliefs change what we perceive. We can see this easily by observing politics. If a politician makes a statement, those who believe as he or she does hear one thing, and those who do not share those beliefs hear something else. That is the result of conceptual bias. Deciding who won a political debate depends entirely on the audiences' beliefs and preferences. The imaginary nature is the product, then, of limited sense capacity, emotional distortion, and conceptual bias.

We must understand this imaginary nature and avoid believing the testimony of our senses as if it were absolute, true reality rather than our individual, limited, distorted perception. We must not give the Good Housekeeping Seal of mental approval to our perceptions. They represent how we see something. They are our perceptions, our opinions. All our opinions are the product of limited sense capacity, emotional distortion, and conceptual bias. The reason everyone does not agree with us is that everyone does not have the same mind. The imaginary nature is not real, and that is why it is called false. It is sometimes referred to as "mere appearance."

The dependent nature is the process by which we come to perceive the imaginary nature. It is called dependent because the process is contingent on causes and conditions. Let us use the example of sight. Our ability to see an object is dependent on many things like light, non-obstruction, distance, and our ability to recognize the object. The dependent nature refers to the combination of these causes and conditions that allow us to perceive. If we investigate our imaginary perceptions, we will find the causes

and conditions that allow us to perceive them. Why did we see the snake instead of the rope in the garden at night? If we analyze the causes and conditions, we will notice that it was dark, that darkness obscures our limited vision, that we are afraid of snakes, that the rope was arranged in a certain way that resembled a coiled snake, etc. The snake is not there, but that does not mean that nothing is there. There are always causes producing the imaginary perception. Even the wildest thoughts of people who are allegedly insane have such causes and conditions.

Both the imaginary and the dependent nature, Dolpopa tells us, are "non-existent," meaning that they are insubstantial, dependent, and impermanent. Non-existent does not mean there is nothing there. It means that our perception of it is an insubstantial image in our mind, a product of our sense limitations, emotional distortions, and conceptual bias. It is not permanent, and it is dependent on causes and conditions. It may seem redundant to say that the dependent nature is dependent, but our perception of what is dependent is also dependent on our sense limitations, our emotional distortions, and our conceptual biases. There is no such thing as a purely objective perception. Our "objective analysis" is dependent on causes and conditions, and even the most exhaustive analysis will miss something. That is why we keep reviewing and rewriting history, as well as science. History and science are ever-changing opinions.

> *The imaginary nature arises from appearances. And how does the imaginary nature arise from appearances? As the objects and forms of the dependent nature appear, attachment results in two kinds of imaginary reality. These are what the Tathagatas, the Noble Ones, the Fully Enlightened describe as "attachment to appearance" and "attachment to name."*
>
> *Attachment to appearance involves attachment to external and internal entities, while attachment to name involves attachment to the individual and shared characteristics of these external and internal entities. These are the two kinds of imaginary nature. The ground and support from which they arise is the dependent nature.* —Buddha Sakyamuni, Lankavatara Sutra

Then Dolpopa says, "The fully established True Nature is never non-existent." There are some persons who believe that nothing withstands analysis, and that the ultimate reality is that there is no reality. But Dolpopa asserts that the "fully established True Nature is never non-existent." We must agree that it is contrary to our experience, our intuition, and to analysis to believe that nothing could be the cause of anything, much less of everything. That notion is based on the mistaken concept that emptiness means nothingness. Just because we become enthralled by the analysis of the imaginary nature, which reveals that all our perceptions are insubstantial, impermanent, and dependent, we should not reify that analysis and turn it into the view that nothing is true. This tendency is dangerous and is why our great teacher Nagarjuna states in the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, "*The Buddhas have proclaimed that emptiness corrects all wrong views; but the view of emptiness is incorrigible*."

Our understanding of emptiness comes from asking if a phenomenon is permanent, substantial, and independent. That is a helpful way to dispose of wrong views about reality. But we are in trouble if we turn that analysis into our view of reality.

> *By misunderstanding emptiness, persons of little intelligence destroy themselves, like those who incorrectly seize a snake or cast a curse that curses them.* —Nagarjuna

Shunya is the Sanskrit word that we are translating as emptiness, and it does not mean nothingness. It means the space in which everything takes place. It is important to understand that what Dolpopa says here is that even the imaginary and the dependent arise somewhere and somehow. Where and how do they arise? If there were no ultimate reality, it would mean by elimination that these material appearances are all there is. If that were so, then we should just grab all the material stuff that we can. There would be nothing else to do but get rich or get powerful. We see this tendency among nihilists —

even among Buddhist nihilists. If there is no ultimate reality, this is it, so let us amass wealth, pleasure, and power.

> *If this Dharma is misunderstood, it will ruin the unwise,*
> *for they will sink deeply into the filth of nihilistic views.* —Nagarjuna

Dolpopa says that the Great Middle Way, "transcends existence and non-existence," which means, first, that it does not fall on the side of the mistaken belief that everything that "is" exists as it appears. As we have explained, all our perceptions are a product of our imagination and dependent on causes and conditions. Nor does the Middle Way fall on the extreme side of ultimate non-existence, because we acknowledge that there is a True Nature that is truly established, meaning that it is real, independent, and permanent. What appears to the ordinary consciousness of unenlightened sentient beings is the product of sense limitation, emotional distortion, and conceptual bias, but the enlightened awareness of the Buddhas perceives directly and unmistakably reality as it is, thusness, untainted by false notions of self and selves, phenomena and characteristics.

> *Without reifying what is not,*
> *may we realize the abiding nature of what is!*
> *With a decline of view and a decline of conduct,*
> *may we pacify the demons of these two degenerations,*
> *and swiftly perfect the view, meditation, and conduct of the Pure Dharma!*
> —Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen

This Great Middle Way transcends eternalism and nihilism. Eternalism is the belief that independent, separate selves exist without end; that duality of subject and object is eternal. Nihilism is the belief that nothing is real, and nothing is true. The Great Middle Way transcends both. It is beyond, not between, these two extremes. We share our view not to impose it, but we must make clear distinctions, because if we do not make these distinctions, it is very easy to veer off in the wrong direction.
For ordinary beings, it is impossible not to have a view, but it is not impossible to understand that our view is limited and cannot be ultimate. View is perspective, and we cannot help but have one. We try to make corrections, and at the very least to identify wrong view, and that is why Buddhist commentary is primarily engaged in identifying and refuting wrong views. As human beings, it is impossible to say, "This is THE right view." The moment we enunciate it, we have limited it, and the true Right View is unlimited. The best thing that we can do as humans is to say why this and that are wrong, and identify the possible pitfalls. That is a great help. If we are walking into a minefield, it is good to have a map of where the mines are located. Therefore, we need to make clear distinctions.

The fully established True Nature is Buddha Nature. It is not individual, although there are multiple manifestations. True Nature is "non-dual", which is the better term, because it simply negates the subject-object distinction. That the fully established True Nature is never non-existent does not have to be taken on faith. The fully established True Nature withstands analysis.

There is direct perception, inference, and valid testimony, which are the three types of valid evidence or proof. However, even valid testimony and inference is insufficient to establish the True Nature. It must be experienced, and it can be directly perceived in meditation. Our great Jonang Root Lama, Dolpopa, was originally ordained in the Sakya lineage. He visited Jonang as a young monk and was so impressed by the meditation practices and teachings that eventually, as he began to use those practices and to directly perceive the True Nature, he became the fourth Throne Holder of Jonang.

In terms of applying this teaching, it means not to take things so seriously and so personally. We can know that our perceptions are a bit like going to the movies, seeing what is on the screen, and knowing

that it is not real. When we know this, we still act according to what we perceive, but we do not accept it as the absolute truth. That makes an enormous difference. Most of our suffering is based on our reification of that which does not truly exist. Understanding emptiness helps us emotionally, and it helps us conceptually not to grant permanence to something that is just a perception. Tomorrow, we will look at it differently. We apply this teaching by living by our own light instead of by perceived things to which we are constantly reacting. We spend most of our time reacting to things that are not real. We can stop reacting and start living. We can start living by our own principles, whatever they may be. It is good to start living by our principles; they will get better with time. We must live according to what we think is right. That is true freedom —to follow our way— not in reaction to what others appear to be doing or saying.

Not believing appearances to be true does not mean that we totally discount appearances. We are discussing the interpretation we give to those appearances. They appear on the screen of our mind: we project it, and therefore we have much more control over the script than we thought we had. It is our movie, so we can change the characters. We start by changing our own character. So many of us live a cartoon existence. We do not have to follow someone else's script; we can throw it out. It is not real.

Very few people see reality as it is, and fewer still have the capacity to explain it without believing their explanations to be absolute, ultimate truth. We can never reify our own experience, no matter what it is. However, we can share it in case it may be helpful. Dolpopa had a great mind, but he was extremely humble. He composed many prayers, such as this one:

> *In this and every life, may I share the Dharma;*
> if I cannot share it, may I uphold it; *the Dharma.*
> *If I cannot do even that, let me share in the suffering of others.*

He understood limitation and knew that his explanations would not make sense to everyone. It is sad that more do not understand, but it is worse to impose one's view. Dolpopa also famously said, "*At Jonang we do not take sides; especially not our own side*." That may sound crazy, but when we think about it, we see that is the only right way to be. Taking sides means that we have already decided, *a priori*, who is right and who is wrong. Once we have made that determination, then anything that occurs to us "must" be the truth! We do not take sides, but say, "This is how we see it." and offer it to others, who can take it or leave it. If we decide that we are always right, that is very problematic. We cannot learn anything new. How can we learn anything new if we already know everything?

This teaching is not meant to confuse or be complex, but to give us the tools with which we can live without so much anxiety and confusion and suffering. Even if we cannot recite the definitions of the three natures, it does not matter. These statements of the Buddha can help us understand:

> *Name and appearance are the imaginary nature.*
> *Because the mind and what belongs to the mind are dependent on projection for their existence and arise together with name, just as do the sun and its rays, and because they are supported by the differentiation of their various appearances, they constitute the dependent nature.* […]
>
> *And what is the truly established nature? This is the mode that is free from names, appearances, and projection. It is attained by Buddha wisdom and is the realm where the personal realization of Buddha wisdom takes place. This is the truly established nature, and the heart of Buddha Nature*. —Buddha Sakyamuni, Lankavatara Sutra

At the very least, we do not have to take appearances so seriously. That little kernel is enough to reduce our suffering and anxiety significantly. Why don't I have to take this all so seriously? Because all is insubstantial, dependent, and impermanent. As it came, it will go. The bad news is that nothing lasts

forever. The good news is that nothing lasts forever. We must remember to always apply these teachings to our lives. We do not study this text to learn philosophy, but to help us reduce and eventually eliminate our suffering and the suffering of all sentient beings. We learn these teachings not to be able to use words that others do not understand, but to see our own Buddha Nature and the Buddha Nature of others, and to understand that we project a great deal of what we like and do not like upon things that just are.

THIRTEEN

I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach, "All relative phenomena are merely the dependent origination of cause and result, but the self-arisen Absolute transcends dependent origination," teaching the difference between primordial awareness that arises from conditions, and what is self-arisen.

Dependent origination is the relationship between cause and effect. Nothing arises independently of a cause and every cause produces an effect. It is as simple as that. Unfortunately, we may understand this very well conceptually, but still seem to think that our actions will not have consequences, that we can get away with this or that without experiencing a result.

> *This being, that becomes; from the arising of this, that arises.*
> *This not being, that does not become; from the ceasing of this, that ceases.*
> —Buddha Shakyamuni

Karma is an aspect of dependent origination. It is one type of dependent origination, but there are many aspects of dependent origination that have nothing to do with karma. For example, it rains, and the ground gets wet. There is no karma (volitional action) involved, but there is dependent origination. When water meets most materials, those materials get wet.

> *What is meant by dependent origination? It means that nothing included within inner or outer phenomena has arisen without a cause. Neither have they originated from what are not their causes; that is, non causes such as a permanent creator, the self, time, or an almighty deity.*
>
> *The fact that phenomena arise based on the interdependence of their respective causes and conditions coming together is called dependent origination.* —Jamgon Mipham

One of the things that we must understand about dependent origination is that there is not a mechanical relationship between causes and effects. The same cause, given different conditions, will produce vastly different effects. For example, if you plant two seeds from the same plant, but give one water, light, and good soil, and deprive the other, the cause (the seed) in both cases is similar, but the conditions are different and so will be the effect. However, given the same conditions, two seeds that appear the same may also grow and yield differently.

We know that there are causes and conditions, but with our limited intelligence and senses, we cannot figure out the number of causes and conditions that affect a given manifestation. If one thing could produce the same result always, whenever you have the one thing, the same result would always ensue. However, that is not the case. Sometimes we do the same thing and get a different result because the conditions are different. I learned from some friends that a good baker needs to consider such things as the elevation, the type of water, the climate, and the barometric pressure, or a different result may occur even when using the exact same recipe, ingredients, and methods.

We must understand that dependent origination is far more complex than "A, therefore B." We all have different karmic accumulations, which is the entire deposit of all our previous actions, and these predispose us to act in certain ways. We are all different. Even identical twins do not have identical karma. If they had identical karma, they would be the same person. The fact that they are two should give us a hint that they are not the same person.

We bring many causes to our situation, and there are always different conditions. The purpose of today's text is not to explore karma, but we must keep in mind that an inscrutable number of causes and conditions come together to produce a result, and that result will become a part of the inscrutable

number of causes and conditions that will continue to produce results. Even as we are calling something a result, it is already a cause.

Our true nature is natural perfection. We only need to recall that, and we wake from the nightmare of samsara. It is our mind that is susceptible to this nightmare. The path is all about remembering, and eliminating distractions. Our purpose is to align the mind *for* Enlightenment with the mind *of* Enlightenment. We do this by removing the obstacles. It is the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination that distract us from our own nature. This is the Buddha's original contribution. It explains the existence of human suffering. Dependent origination is the confluence of causes and conditions that produce

phenomena, whereas Buddhahood is not caused. Buddhahood is not dependently originated. It does not depend on causes and conditions —it is self-arising.

The 12 Links are often portrayed as points on a wheel, the Bhava Chakra, to show this is not a linear sequence but continues inexorably and interminably —until we remember. Humans now living are already distracted. We must understand that: the distraction has already started. This enables us to interrupt the distraction.

The 12 Links start with Ignorance. Our main delusion is the belief that we are a particular, permanent, independent being, separate from all others. We believe our life is separate from the rest of existence, an enclosed entity, rather than belonging within an intercausal, interconnected continuum of manifestation. We are *being* (verb), not *a being* (name). Ignorance is the false sense of separation. As we have seen, the basis of this false imputation is the 5 aggregates: form (body), feeling, perception (the thinking that supposes, 'I see this; i know this'), volition or tendencies, and consciousness. These qualities and functions exist, but we project them onto something that does not exist: a self. Any time we think we are a separate being, it is on the basis of one of these five things.

The second link is Formations. Ignorance causes formations, our tendencies. Formations occur when we miss seeing the real causes and conditions. Formations are attempts to explain something that has a real explanation which we do not see, so we make one up using our wrong views. Formations are impelled and determined by our previous actions. Reinforced, they become habits, and then character, which is accumulated habits. The word was originally an agricultural term: *samskaras*: grooves or furrows. Once the furrows are established, the water will flow in a certain way, according to those channels. That is the image that the Buddha chose for our tendencies, our habits. Once we begin to act according to the tendencies, they have a destination. They begin in one place and end in another, going in the direction that the furrows indicate. These can change. But if our mental state remains characterized by fear and helplessness because of the mental formations that we accumulate in a human life, then the next life will most probably be in the animal realm. There is no punishment or reward involved. It is a question of suitability. What form will best express the mental formations that we have accumulated? If we have certain tendencies, we will develop a form that expresses them best. It is as simple as that.

The third link is consciousness. Accumulated tendencies cause our consciousness. When there are formations, there is consciousness. Once we have those tendencies, those tendencies define our existence. If we have formations, habits, and tendencies that require a certain kind of body to manifest, that is the consciousness that we will develop. Once we have those tendencies, those made-up explanations, this develops a particular consciousness. Consciousness projects self and selves, phenomena and characteristics. Consciousness is always dual, always *of* something —which then implicates an observer separate from that thing, falsely imagining and story-building an ego. Consciousness divides. Human consciousness is analytical, breaking things into pieces, taking a point of view and separating itself from everything. That is a fundamental cause of suffering. Experience happens, perceptions happen, but not <u>*to*</u> 'me.'

Persons with a materialist bias wrongly think that the subtle is produced by the gross, but that is an absurd misunderstanding. The mind and body do not have a consciousness; consciousness generates a mind and a body. Everything in our experience begins with the subtle and leads to the gross. How does a massive building come into being? Someone must have the desire, then the idea, then the plan, before the actual building can materialize. Everything starts subtle and becomes gross. But people today who study the mind think that everything is material —a mixture of chemicals in the brain; that all mental states are expressions of chemical changes in the brain instead of the other way around.

The consciousness and its tendencies that are previously accumulated enter a certain realm. The human realm is characterized by craving and striving. We are not content with what we have. We do not accept that, agree relaxedly with that. We want *more*; we want *different*; we are always on the look-out. Everything we do requires lots of striving and effort. That is what it means to be human. There are five other main types: celestial, demonic, animal, phantasmal, and infernal.

The fourth link is the body-mind complex. This is easier to communicate in Tibetan where the word for mind means a process, rather than a thing with compartments. Sanskrit uses the term *nama-rupa* (name-and-form). When consciousness has entered, then mind and body develop. Once one's tendencies impel us to have a particular consciousness, this will need to be expressed in some way. Consciousness is still subtle. Name-and-form appears when we take a particular embodiment. The consciousness that comes from the karmic formations in a previous life is what creates the name and form (mind and body). Name and form are gross manifestations of consciousness. Life precedes conception. If there is no consciousness there, what would enter the womb? There would be no name and form. It is a mental continuum, which is synonymous with life.

The fifth link is the Senses (the usual five plus the mental sense, since the mind perceives thoughts and emotions). With a specific body-mind complex (subtle, not yet physical) comes a particular set of senses appropriate to it. Name and form cause the six sense sources. Some are more acute, some are blunt. Some embodiments have fewer than six sense-bases. Some, like plants, do not have sufficient senses to recognize themselves. Up to this point, the six sense sources, we cannot alter the chain of links. It is already operational, given our human birth. It is innate. Not inherent, but innate. Innate means that at the birth of this body, it was present.

The sixth link is Contact. Once we have a particular set of senses, this determines how and what we can contact. The objects of perception we have are wholly dependent on what our senses contact. We do not perceive cosmic rays; we have no sense for them. Humans see nothing in the dark; owls can. Our given senses determine what we can and cannot contact, and the depth to which we can contact it.

The seventh link is Feeling or Sensation. This is the key link for us, where we can apply effort and wisdom to break and reverse the cycle. Depending on contact, feeling arises. This is of three kinds: pleasant, unpleasant, and neither one. *All of this is determined by the preceding chain.* What is pleasant, what is unpleasant, and what is neither depends on our level of ignorance, on the types of formations, on the consciousness we have, on our body-mind complex, our particular senses, on the type and intensity of contact. For humans, this is the place where we can best interrupt the cycle of the twelve links. If we train to focus on the object, and do not obsess and dwell on it but recognize it as transient in our minds unless we fuel it with attention, we break the cycle.

The eighth link is Craving. We crave for what is felt. What distracts humans the most? The sense objects of touch, of taste, of vision, of sound, of thoughts and images that come to our mind. If we dwell on the sensation, instead of noticing it and then letting it go as momentary and insubstantial, then *immediately* attachment for the pleasant, aversion to the unpleasant, and indifference to what we don't care about, arises.

We desire to possess, reject, or ignore the object that we perceive. Attachment, aversion, and indifference are the unbeneficial emotions, and the source of these is sense impressions leading to feeling. There is a craving to possess the pleasant. There is craving to separate from or destroy the unpleasant, and craving to ignore that which we find neither pleasant nor unpleasant. So craving is not restricted to that which we like.

It is up to us. Emotions only arise because we form a feeling. We wrongly impute an emotion to the object— but the car, the shoe, or the restaurant do not cause emotion. No object affects our emotions unless it pleases or displeases us. An expensive object might bring no feeling of desire for it. Nothing in the object makes us feel emotion. We can only become attached to our feeling that something is unpleasant. We can only become attached to our *feeling* that something is pleasant. We can only become attached to our *feeling* that something is neither pleasant nor unpleasant —all dependent on the prior links of causation. If we can break it here, then we can undo the cycle of suffering, the main characteristic of our existence.

This is the process by which we become attached, averse, and indifferent. Enmity only arises from an afflicted emotion between us and the other. Very rarely is anyone actually presenting you with a hazardous challenge, or physical danger. If we are not attached to the feeling of competition and threat that another wants to possess what we have; if we do not fear that someone will impose something on us that we dislike; if we are not holding onto feeling afraid that someone will force us to deal with something we don't want to deal with and prefer to not be bothered with, automatically, there is goodwill. There is no attachment, aversion, or indifference.

The ninth link is grasping or Clinging. Craving is still marginally related to the object. Clinging is more about the feeling: 'I want that pleasantness.' The focus has changed from the object to the feeling. For instance, 'I like the taste of this apple and I want more of it' is craving. 'I want that pleasantness fulfilled and satisfied' is clinging. Clinging is emotion. It is the need and striving never to be separated from what is pleasant, to constantly avoid what is unpleasant, and to never face anything we do not want to face.

The progression from contact to feeling will happen, but the progression from feeling to clinging does not need to happen —that, we can cut and stop. If we do not cling, there is no more becoming. When there is no clinging, we are freed.

There are four great graspings. We think that we only grasp at objects, but our grasping knows no bounds. When we crave, we cling to sense objects, views, morals and rules, and views of self. It is easy to understand grasping to sense objects —the entire economy of consumer capitalism is based on that. 'Click and buy' is our generation's perfecting of the notion of grasping. We also have many views which we grasp: political, social, cultural, religious, etc. We have been known to go to war over them. No other species goes to war over views.

The tenth link is Becoming. When there is clinging, becoming arises. When we cling, we identify with form, sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness. Through grasping, we act with body, speech, and mind. Once there is the perception that there is something to be had, something to be pushed away, or something to be ignored, there must be an actor. Up to now, there is no 'I' involved. Once there is the strong desire to possess the pleasant, reject the unpleasant, ignore that which is neither – who will do it? Who will grab it, or push it away? In this particular sequence of the 12 links, this is where the need for a self arises. Once this link in the dependent chain of consequences from fundamental ignorance is reached, the fantasy 'I' results, with the attribution that only this 'I' acts. This is how the 'I' or ego arises.

What is "Becoming"? It is literally being this and that, and we are all full of being this and that: I am American, I am female, I am young, I am educated, I am wealthy. Becoming is always, at best, a

reduction. When you say, “I am this,” is that all you are? Are you even really that? It is just a concept; it is not true. We can dis-identify, even now, although we have become this name and form.

The eleventh link is Rebirth. From becoming we are born. Birth is the birth of self, of ‘I.’ Karma is ego intention, done by an ego we identify with. This is how ‘me’ and ‘mine’ are born, this is how self is born. This generates the karma that determines our next existence. It is a sequence of errors, arising from the error of not seeing causes and conditions. Only when the ego with which we identify is born, are we able to act, to produce karma. Through the power of becoming, we are reborn in a particular place, whenever the necessary conditions are assembled.

The twelfth link is Aging and Death. Because the self is not real, it needs to be constantly created. There is nothing solid here. It will last as long as it is held, then we must bring it to life all over again. There is no stable ‘me’. It is very fragile, because it has no substance. It lasts for the duration of its exertion. Every time we say ‘I,‘ it’s a different ‘I.’ It’s constantly being created, held for a brief moment, then disappears. This is why it’s so easily challenged and offended.

Aging, death, anguish, lamentation, pain, mental unhappiness, anxiety; these vividly emerge from birth. Likewise, the entire mass of suffering emerges. Following rebirth, there is a continual process of aging as the aggregates change and develop. Then eventually there is death when the aggregates cease, as all compounded phenomena do.

Dolpopa says here that, “All relative phenomena are merely the dependent origination of cause and result.” What are relative phenomena? They are all the phenomena that we find in this reality that we now experience: the relative world. We experience relativity in the sense that wherever there is a “here,” there is a “there,” and the two are not absolute, but relative to each other. Can you find “here” on the map? Wherever you are is “here,” and wherever you are not is “there.” What is big and what is small? What is near and far, dark and bright, good and evil? It depends. Wherever there is perspective, there is relativity. Different people look at the same action, and some find it good and some bad. For there to be perspective, there must be duality, more than one point of view. Multiple perspectives and duality are what define our relative world. These are not complex philosophical ideas but something that all of us can easily understand.

There are always various perspectives, which is why there is a saying that if two philosophers agree, one of them is not a philosopher. The other part of that saying is that, if two saints disagree, one of them is not a saint. That sort of truth is what Dolpopa asserts in saying “the self-arisen Absolute transcends dependent origination.” When there is no duality —no various points of view, no separation— there is no dependent arising. There are no causes and conditions sustaining absolute reality, because there is no duality and no time. Time does not exist except in relative reality. It is a function of perspective, a human concoction, a complete fabrication from the sequence of attention. Several observers watching the same event may tell a different story depending on the sequence of their attention. One may see “a” first, then b, and finally c. The other may see b first, then a, then c. Another may see c first, then b, and finally a. And that sequence of attention will determine their perspective on the event.

What Dolpopa says here is that what lies behind these points of view is not nothing. There is something we call ultimate reality, but it is not a thing. It is self-arisen, meaning it is not the product of experience, whereas everything in duality, which is not ultimate, is the product of experience. We experience the world through our interaction with it. In science, we know that the act of observation changes what is observed. There is no such thing as merely observing. As long as we have a point of view, it affects what we observe. That is why in Buddhism we say not to take sides, meaning not to have a fixed perspective, a party line, an inflexible view. The moment we have a fixed perspective, everything else appears antagonistic.

Our perspective generates our experience. We do not create the external world, but our experience of the world is the product of our limited senses, emotional distortions, and conceptual biases. That is what determines our experience. I am not referring to the external reality or lack thereof outside of our minds, but to the fact that our experience of reality is a product of our senses, emotions, and concepts. Other people encountering the same object will have a different experience of it. Our present experience is dictated by our emotions, our past experiences, and our intellectual and sense capacity. By intellectual capacity, I am not referring to cleverness, but to the presence or absence of a concept for the thing experienced. If we do not have a concept, the experience will not register.

Dolpopa does not posit that there is some *thing* out there that is ultimately real that can be seen the same way by all perspectives. That type of notion is called eternalism and is an extreme view. Rather, he says that when we do not fixate on a separate perspective, we can directly experience what is, which is not a *thing* but a process. He says the process is ultimately real. Otherwise, we end up in the other extreme, which is nihilism, the belief that nothing is real. Dolpopa is speaking of primordial awareness, where there is no consciousness of separation —just being (verb), not a being (entity); just process, not stasis.

Dolpopa completes this text by saying that he honors those who teach, "the difference between primordial awareness that arises from conditions and what is self-arisen." To fully understand this, we must know a bit about the polemics among Buddhist teachers during Dolpopa's time. There were people then and there are still entire lineages that claim that any wisdom is provisional —that it is fabricated, that it is an intellectual understanding. What Dolpopa says is that the true teaching transcends the difference between a fabricated "awareness" that arises from conditions (the idea that by reductive analysis, we attain primordial awareness) and self-arisen primordial awareness (not produced by analysis but directly experienced). Dolpopa points out the difference.

The whole text of The Dharma Handbook was composed to eliminate such misconceptions. Some people in his time were used to hearing that, if you analyze things, the ultimate result of analysis is "primordial awareness," but because it is produced by analysis, it is not ultimate. Therefore, the ultimate is nothing. A school of Buddhist thought (the *prasangika*), held that every postulate can be reduced to the absurd and, therefore, nothing is ultimately true. They were very influential and gaining ascendancy in Tibet at the time that Dolpopa composed this text, and they are dominant in certain circles today. That is why Dolpopa points out these fine distinctions, because nihilism is extremely prevalent today. Those who think that they can get away with treating other humans and animals in horrendous ways do so because they believe that there is ultimately nothing beyond appearances. If we can get away with it, then why not do it?

Dolpopa asks us to be careful not to allow our idea of primordial awareness to become a thing in itself. We must distinguish clearly, because the moment we make something a thing, we are then able to refute it. If we refute everything, eventually we will fall into nihilism. Do not turn a process of analysis into ultimate reality. A process of analysis, by definition, is a product of the human mind. Analysis is a human function that arises from and is constrained by the structure, functions, and limitations of our minds; there is nothing ultimate about it. The human mind is incapable of sustaining apparent contradictions simultaneously. We must not turn our limitations into the measure of ultimate reality, when it is simply the measure of our inability to comprehend.

The human mind is always limited, but there are helpful approximations that make it possible for us to function in a practical way. Just because the mind has limitations does not mean that we should be mindless. A hammer has excellent uses, but we cannot play the piano with it. A toddler may not be able to do calculus, but we do not get rid of the toddler. Just as the ego has its uses —to preserve the physical integrity of the body— the mind has its uses. Within duality, it works fine, but do not ask for

answers beyond the capacity of the mind. Buddhism does not reject the mind or the senses, or the ego, for that matter. It does not reject analysis but uses everything in its right place. That is part of being realistic. If we are going to cut vegetables, we should use a knife, not a spoon. If we eat soup, it is better to use a spoon. Ultimately, is a knife better than a spoon? It depends on what we are doing.

We have human minds, and dependent origination dictates our experience. We have both common and uncommon appropriations. All beings of a species share some characteristics (common appropriations), and also have some that are individual (uncommon). As human beings, we have common karmic appropriations in terms of our environment —we see the sun, stars, moon and earth and experience day and night in certain ways. Our karma produced a human body with a human mind, and that human mind and body tend to experience reality in particular ways. We breathe air and cannot breathe in water, but the fish that share this world with us have the opposite experience. So, it is the karmic appropriations, the particular chain of dependent origination that gives us or the fish our particular experience. What perceptions we share with others are not unreal in the sense that we are making them up. Our perceptions depend on the causes and conditions that brought us to be where and who we are right now.

Dolpopa has already explained that everyone has Buddha Nature, which is capable of directly experiencing self-arisen primordial wisdom. Because we have that, when we eliminate what impedes the manifestation of Buddha Nature, it will be spontaneously present. That is why, in meditation, we cultivate peace. Once there is peace, there will be clarity. If we have a problem, would we rather be nervous or calm? Which will produce greater insight in any situation, agitation or tranquility? Being peaceful and calm allows us to see more clearly in every situation. When we cultivate peace, we do not have to do anything to obtain penetrating clear insight, primordial awareness. It is there. We have just been covering it up. That is why we do not need to visualize anything during meditation. We do not want to superimpose anything. If we can see clearly, why create obstacles to that? We do not want to add impediments.

In our meditation tradition, we just stop. That was the famous instruction that the Buddha gave to the mass murderer, Angulimala. He was quite notorious and was aiming to create a necklace out of the thumbs of one-thousand murder victims. The Buddha told him to stop, and that habitual, serial killer understood that instruction. When he asked to be ordained as a monk, the Buddha ordained him on the spot. The Buddha's actions in this story teach us that, when we stop identifying with "me and mine," all the qualities of Buddha Nature are already there. When we stop, the reality is there. "Angulimala the murderer" is a false identity, and when he stops killing, his true nature is already there. One was dependently originated, but the one that is self-arisen is not a fabrication.

That is the ultimate teaching on Buddha Nature. It has no causes and no conditions. There is nothing we can do to fabricate it and nothing we can do to deny it. It is just a matter of letting go. Dolpopa has also famously explained that Buddhism is a path, not of production, but of letting go of wrong views and afflicted emotions. Buddha Nature is already there; it does not need to be produced or fabricated. Maitreya says, "*There is nothing to add and nothing to take away*" from Buddha Nature.

Buddha Nature is not stained, nor does it need polishing. The stains that cover our Buddha Nature are incidental. They are never a part of or commingled with it. There is no incrustation. Buddha Nature is always perfect and brilliant and full of all perfect qualities. However, there are two veils covering our Buddha Nature: wrong views and afflicted emotions.

om svabhava shuddha sarva dharma svabhava shuddho' ham This mantra was often recited by my Lama, and it can be translated as: "All is pure as it truly is; I am pure as I truly am." We are pure, not as we appear, but as we truly are.

FOURTEEN

I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach, "All outer and inner phenomena are merely the confusing sphere of ignorance, but the other is the true nature, self-arisen primordial awareness," drawing the distinction between consciousness and primordial awareness, cyclic existence and cessation, and the two truths.

This text affirms a central point made by the Buddha Shakyamuni and by all our lineage teachers, but it is also a source of confusion for some. Dolpopa begins by saying that all outer and inner phenomena are merely the confusing sphere of ignorance. Once again, he is referring here to the three natures: the imaginary, the dependent, and the truly established.

Let us review these important concepts. The imaginary nature is the nature of our perceptions. Why call them imaginary? Remember that the Buddha and Dolpopa are speaking about our experience of reality. Whoever claims to describe something objectively is only imagining that objectivity. There is no possibility of an objective description of anything. Who would offer that description? There is always a perspective. If we intend to describe a house "objectively," from what perspective are we going to describe it? Will we describe it from the front, the back, from the perspective of the squirrels, or from a satellite? As we have already mentioned, the observer affects what is observed. The moment we observe a phenomenon, we have changed it. Beyond the fact of perspective, we have three problems with perception. The first one involves the limitations of our senses. Using sight as an example, the human eye perceives a narrow band of the light spectrum. The greater part of the spectrum is invisible to us. We also do not see when there is no external source of light. And then, within this narrow range, the human eye is incapable of seeing anything that is too close or too far. It can see nothing placed behind an opaque object. We may also have personal limitations on our sense of sight, such as myopia, or color blindness, or cataracts. All other senses have similar limitations.

The second problem with perception is emotional distortions. Any form of agitation will limit our ability to perceive. If we are distracted, we do not perceive. When we are excited or agitated, our ability to perceive is affected. When we are upset, we can fail to see things that are right in front of us. For example, how often have we been late and rushing around to find something we need that was clearly visible or even in our hand?

Emotional agitation does not allow our perceptions to register and creates a tendency to see what we want to see and not see what we do not want to see. In this way, a man may fool himself into mistaking the look of a hungry woman toward the buffet table for a look of desire directed at him. We can also see and hear what we are afraid to see and hear. In politics, when people have decided that a candidate for office is right, they then hear what they want to hear and see what they want to see. That is true of most things. Once we have made up our mind that a certain person, or country, or team is best, whatever "our" side says or does is fine, and whatever the other side says or does is wrong. These types of perceptions come from emotional distortion.

The third source of limitation is called conceptual bias, which is a bigger problem than the other two. If we have no category for a particular object of perception, we cannot perceive it. When someone's world view is not capable of holding on or relating to an idea, it does not enter. We must have a category to put it in, something it resembles that we already have accepted and learned. If we do not have a concept for it, it will not register. Re-cognition is cognizing again. If there is no correspondence, there is no recognition. Climate change is an example of people unable to see that for which they have no concept. Ninety-seven percent of the world's scientists can see it, but whole groups of people are saying it is not there. There are people who see racism everywhere and those who do not see it anywhere.

There are people who see male privilege everywhere, and those who do not see it anywhere. To explain the sun's rising in the east and setting in the west, people firmly held the concept that the sun revolved around the earth for centuries. Such conceptual distortion is not emotional. Emotions go up and down, but conceptual distortion is a decision, formidable and static. And if we have no concept for something, we invent one.

These limitations and distortions are the reason we call ordinary perception the imaginary nature: the perception says more about the observer than about the perceived object. If you believe that things are a certain way, you will not perceive things outside of your beliefs. You imagine that something is a certain way, but another person from another perspective will see it very differently. What is tall? What is far, near, ugly? Near is wherever you are, far is wherever you are not. Ugly is what you find ugly. If this were not the case, we would all agree on everything, such as whether a particular person is beautiful. No person is objectively beautiful; people disagree. Even the cultural idea of beauty changes over time. The Renaissance sense of beauty is not the same as what was held in the Fifties, which changed again in the Sixties, and is not our idea of beauty today.

The imaginary nature includes thoughts, which are also objects of perception. We perceive our thoughts. Is the way we perceive our thoughts objective? Or are they subject to distortion, limitation, previous concepts, experiences, and emotion? How do we perceive our thoughts? A similar thought, perceived by two different individuals, can be a source of fear, or shame, or celebration. If we could induce the exact same thought in three people, one might be pleased, one might be horrified, and one might be bored, because the perception is completely subjective —same thought, different imagination. All sensorial and mental perceptions are imaginary. Imaginary does mean that they do not exist. Imaginary means that we have supplied the characteristics. We impute all characteristics; they are not inherent in the object. A particular food, for example, may be thought delicious by some and unsavory by others. The characteristic of deliciousness is not inherent in the food but dependent on the person or being. Similarly, we project the characteristic of beauty.

Unfortunately, we assign the label of truth to our individual perceptions, which is dangerous. "I saw it with my own eyes" does not mean "Therefore it must be true." It is true that we saw it with our own eyes, but what we saw with our own eyes is what we imagined it to be. We must not believe everything we think, just as we should not believe everything we see or hear. This does not mean that we should be paralyzed in the world, but simply that we avoid ascribing permanent truth to any of our perceptions, including our mental perceptions.

The dependent nature relates to the mechanism of our perceptions, to the basis of the imaginary nature. Why do we see what we see, hear what we hear, and so on? The answer is, because of causes and conditions, the essential part of which is our previous experience. The dependent nature refers to what makes us perceive the world the way we do, and this is fundamentally through the accumulation of experiences and the formation of tendencies. When we see a certain thing, we already tend to like it or dislike it. When we examine why we impute the characteristics that we do, we acknowledge that causes and conditions fabricate the imaginary nature. By dependent nature we understand that all causes produce effects, and all effects have causes, but we cannot exactly know the interrelationships of what causes and conditions lead to certain effects. We cannot pinpoint one cause for our likes or dislikes. Acknowledging the dependent nature is an improvement over affirming the imaginary, because we are accepting "This is not the way it is; this is the way I perceive," but we cannot really know the specifics. We can never figure out what particular combination of causes and conditions, in what particular order and intensity, produces a particular effect.

There is no such thing as a perfect correspondence between a single cause and an effect. The Buddha spoke nearly two thousand six hundred years ago of multiple causes and conditions. We cannot say, "I

do this because of that" with any certainty. We have a tendency to try to pinpoint one cause for one effect, because we love to both oversimplify and blame things and people. If we ever had a brother or sister, we understand this basic human tendency. For example, a germ or other anomaly is named the cause of someone's death, when others with the same condition are barely affected by it. Anyone who has a real understanding of health knows that everything is multifactorial. Our politicians do this regularly. They are always pointing the finger at someone, some place, or some group as the cause of all our problems. The dependent nature can be a false attribution of specific causes and conditions, and therefore it is not real either.

Looking back for a moment at Text 13, we see that Dolpopa said "All relative phenomena are merely the dependent origination of cause and result." The relative phenomena refer to the imaginary nature, and the dependent origination of cause and result refer to the dependent nature. "But the self-arisen absolute transcends dependent origination." If there were no absolute truth or reality, the first consequence is that the imaginary and the dependent natures become absolute. If there is nothing beyond appearance, then appearance is all there is; appearance is ultimate. If that were so, we should all follow the instruction of Charvaka, the first materialist philosopher, who after examining reality from that nihilistic point of view, concluded, "Get ghee," (clarified butter) since the best we can do in life is gorge ourselves on rich food! Materialism is the result of believing that there is no self-arisen absolute. Why self-arisen? Because it is not produced by causes and conditions. What arises from causes and conditions is necessarily false. False does not mean non-existent. False means insubstantial, impermanent, and dependent.

The perceptions in our mind, their rising and falling, their dependent nature, their origin in past experiences and mental categories, makes them all insubstantial, impermanent, and dependent. We are not talking about the perceived thing-in-itself. We are talking of our perception of the thing, which is all we can talk about. We do not claim, for example, that this desk is necessarily insubstantial. However, our perception, any perception, of the desk is insubstantial because it is an internal mental representation. Is there an actual physical desk in our mind, or just an image of a desk? And if our eyes are closed, or we are unconscious, can we have a perception of the desk? No. It is an internal mental representation, and all internal mental representations are insubstantial. This is what we have. We cannot stand outside of our minds and report on the state of objects. Impermanence refers to the constant changing of each mental perception. We cannot hold on to our perceptions. They come, and they go. We have all taken tests and the answers to questions that we knew then we no longer remember. That which is in our awareness does not stay in our awareness —some of it we can retrieve, but much we cannot.

In Text 14, what does Dolpopa, then, mean by "drawing a distinction between consciousness and primordial awareness?" Without the absolute as a basis for appearance, the insubstantial, impermanent, dependent relative becomes the absolute. But for there to be impermanence, there must be permanence. How could we have insubstantiality if there were no substantiality, or dependence if there is no independence? The self-arisen primordial nature is Buddha Nature, and it is real. If it were not real, it would not be possible to become enlightened. "Self-arisen" means not dependent on causes and conditions. "Absolute" means permanent and truly established, and "not dependent" means not relying on previous causes and conditions. In the West we believe that "higher consciousness" is desirable, but it is not as good as we think, because consciousness is always a symptom of duality. In order to be conscious of something, we must separate from it. We cannot be conscious of a cup without thinking, "I am, the cup is, I see the cup; therefore, I am conscious of the cup." Consciousness is the first symptom of separation: "I exist independently of the other."

The difference between consciousness and primordial awareness is that primordial awareness does not conceptualize "me" and "other" as separate. This is "drawing the distinction between consciousness and primordial awareness."

Cyclic existence is a translation of *samsara*, which is the wheel of birth, disease, aging, and death. Even if we do not accept rebirth, we can see the cycle in our daily lives. We see the changing seasons; we see the sunrise and sunset every day. We wake up (birth); we get hungry, thirsty, and tired (dis-ease); we get tired (aging), and we go to sleep again (death). The cycle happens to animals and plants and to us daily. That is cyclic existence. "Cessation" refers to stopping the cycle. That stopping requires that we are no longer affected by the wrong views of separation and supremacy, which are the cause of the cycle. If we think that we are separate individuals, then those separate individuals will have particular experiences, just like in a dream. While we are dreaming, the dream seems very real. But when we wake up, we see that it was not real. That is why the Buddha is called the Awakened. Buddha does not mean holy, or special, or son of god, or god. It means Awake.

We have one level of being awake when we awaken from our human dreaming state, but the Buddha's way of being awake means to be free from the imaginary and the dependent natures. The Buddhas do not see a different world than we do. Enlightenment does not mean that the relative world dissolves in front of us. We see what everyone else sees but do not confer reality to what does not have it. In one prayer of praise for our teacher Dolpopa, we say that he "apprehends what exists as existing and what does not exist as not existing." He does not stop seeing what we see, but he does not grant it a reality that it does not have, nor does he negate the reality of what is real. Enlightenment is not a weird state. Enlightenment is our natural state, but natural does not mean normal. Normal is a measure of frequency, of what is most common, and in human societies today, the norm is derangement. Our normal is non-enlightenment, but our natural is enlightenment.

Lastly, what are the two truths? This is a fundamental teaching of the Buddha. The two truths are the relative truth and ultimate or absolute truth.

> *You, the knower of the world, realized the two levels of reality by yourself, not studying them from others. They are the relative and the ultimate. There is not some third level of reality.*
> —Sutra of the Meeting of Father and Son

We cannot deny either. If we are playing a game like Chess or Monopoly, there are rules that go with the game, and as long as we are playing, we must observe the rules. However, are the rules true? If we land in jail in Monopoly, are we really in jail? Relative reality, even though it is not true, is the game we are all playing now. To dispense with the rules is foolish. According to western science, a wall is 99.9 percent space —the space between electrons and nucleus, the space between atoms composing the brick. I could say that from the absolute point of view, that wall is mostly space, and so I will walk right through it. However, I will get a bump on the head because, while I am in this relative reality, I must observe the rules of this relative reality. Even though this is not absolutely real, it is provisionally real and should not be denied as such.

Some religious or philosophical people who are prone to deny the provisional can become lacking in compassion, thinking that, because in absolute reality there is no suffering, nothing matters. However, compassion for the suffering experienced in the relative is precisely what we need to get out of this reality. My Lama sometimes encountered people who said, "I am not real, you are not real, nothing is really happening, so why are you talking about radical, universal compassion?" My teacher would then ask them for all their money, reminding them that, if nothing is real, they should not mind handing it over. Suddenly their absolutist view would not be so absolute.

Such intellectual ideas are often used to justify absolute selfishness, which is the cause of samsara. We need to live according to the two truths, and our teachers, beginning with Padmasambhava, have said, "The higher the view, the finer the conduct." If we really know the two truths, then we can be absolutely careful when we act in this world, because with our actions, we are either sustaining or removing, for ourselves and others, the causes of suffering, which trap us in the relative. That is why practice is not sitting on a cushion or coming to Sangha occasionally. Practice is what we do in our everyday life. We call meditation practice "practice" because we sit to recognize our peace so that we can bring it to our everyday activities. We discuss the Dharma not to know more information, but to not be fooled by sensory limitations, emotional distortions, and conceptual biases. We need to act according to the sphere in which we function and with an awareness of the absolute sphere. We need to recognize that our Buddha Nature is self-arisen and not dependent on anything. It has always been and will always be, but this does not mean that nothing needs to be done to uncover it. In relative reality we must exert effort. The effort that is necessary is to stop negative activities and not start new ones, and to initiate positive actions and continue the ones that we are already doing. "Stop, don't start. Start, don't stop."

We have a great deal of evidence for the reality of the absolute, Buddha Nature. Every single act of kindness and compassion and feeling of solidarity that we have ever experienced comes from our Buddha Nature. It is not coming from our relative experience where what we perceive is competition and cruelty and selfishness. The most elegant proof of the absolute is our dissatisfaction with suffering. Why are we dissatisfied with suffering, if this cycle of suffering is all we have ever known? If there were not a state beyond suffering, why would we be interested in it? Where would such an interest come from? Why do all sentient beings everywhere want perfect, uninterrupted happiness? All sentient beings want to escape suffering. Why is that so, if the cycle of birth, aging, illness, and death is all that we have known? The answer is that we intuit that there is a self-arisen, perfect nature that is truly established.

> *If Buddha Nature were not present, there would be no remorse over suffering; there would be no longing for nirvana, nor striving and devotion towards this aim.*
>
> *That with regard to existence and nirvana their respective fault and quality are seen —that suffering is seen as the defect of existence and happiness as the excellence of nirvana— stems from the presence of the disposition to Buddhahood.* —Maitreya

We have the ability, because of the clear teachings that we have received, to make the correct distinctions and not confuse them. We do not need to confuse the difference between the relative and the absolute nor pretend that our behavior in the relative should be entirely guided by what is true in the absolute. We must recognize that there are causes and conditions. We are not obliged to react in the same old ways. We want to stop reacting altogether and begin to respond with compassion. Reaction is automatic, and all automatic reaction is probably unbeneficial —even automatic "compassion," which may be enabling behavior and will only create more problems. Compassion itself must be a response, not a reaction, and must lead to the benefit of others, ourselves, and all beings. Those are the three harvests: self-benefit, the benefit of proximate others, and the benefit of all. Ultimately, when we practice compassion consistently, it becomes spontaneous. That is not a reaction but an abandoning of all reaction. That is not where most of us are right now, but is a wonderful thing to look forward to. Right now, we must act in a compassionate way that is beneficial and avoids pity or a sense of superiority or the illusion of becoming saviors. It is doing what is right because it is right.

There is a reason why the Buddha, in naming the eight components of The Eightfold Noble Path, used the word *samyak*, translated as "Right." We must make that choice: Right View because there is wrong view; Right Intention because there is wrong intention; Right Speech because there is wrong speech; Right Conduct because there is wrong conduct; Right Livelihood because there is wrong livelihood; Right

Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration, because there are wrong mindfulness, wrong effort, and wrong concentration. We are surrounded by it. There are people who are very dedicated to the wrong thing and make much effort. A very efficient butcher is probably mindful, but that is wrong mindfulness. The richest weapons-dealers are very mindful of what they are doing, but that is wrong mindfulness. Similarly, to meditate to escape reality and to have “high experiences” is wrong meditation.

When we make the distinction between what is relative and what is absolute, between the two truths, we must also make the distinction within relative truth that there is Right and not-so-right. We are making this choice all the time. In every decision we make, we are either siding with our Buddha Nature or postponing its manifestation. When we align with our Buddha Nature, it is ultimately easier, just as when you do that which is natural, it has a stronger effect than when you do what is counter to your nature. Swimming against the current is always more difficult than swimming with it. The true current is your Buddha Nature, and swimming with it is easier and will get you farther. Enlightenment is inevitable for every sentient being. The only question we must answer for ourselves, and we answer it every moment of our lives, is “When?”

FIFTEEN

I bow at the feet of the Lamas who distinguish and teach, "The relative three worlds are just an exaggerated, confusing appearance, while the absolute three worlds and the Buddha Essence are an indestructible, unimagined, unconfusing appearance."

The relative three worlds refer to *samsaric* existence, which can be understood in different ways. The classic way is to define three destinations for karmic rebirth: *Kāmaloka* is the realm of desire, Rūpaloka is the realm of form, and Arūpaloka is the realm of formlessness. Some well-known descriptions of these realms present them as encompassing different dimensions of existence for lower beings (from hell wraiths to demigods), higher gods, and highest gods, respectively, but since we have no current experience or recollection of what the "higher" realms may look or feel like, that view is not helpful.

From our human perspective, the realm of desire includes our basic physical wants and desires, like pain, pleasure, hunger, thirst, cold, and sensuality. The realm of form includes our experience with mental concerns, such as gain and loss, fame and infamy, praise and censure, power, and abundance. The formless realm includes our subtle aspirations, academic achievements, art, meditative concentration, and some early signs of enlightenment.

A still more basic way of understanding the three realms is to think that, from where we stand, there is a situation that is inferior to ours and another that is superior. Realms are mental states —that is clearly established in all the sutras. The states of mind that are below the human realm include the hell realm, characterized by hatred and extreme suffering, the ghost realm, characterized by greed and miserliness, and the animal realm, characterized by helplessness and fear. Our human realm or mind state is characterized by craving and striving. The states of mind that are above the human realm include the demigod realm, characterized by jealousy and strife, and the god realm, characterized by pride and indolence.

These other realms are "all in the mind" in exactly the same way that our realm is in our mind. However, we can agree that our realm feels very real to us. All the realms are manifestations of, or migrations through, *samsara*, and they correspond to the dominant state of the mind stream. They are as real to their inhabitants as this one is to us. We can visit other mental states, and we do that often, but we have a predominant state that colors our perception of those other realms. We can only have a human perception of the hell, ghostly, animal, demigod, and god realms. A human undergoing torture may be temporarily experiencing the hell realm, but will have a human perception of it. We may be walking along with our dog, but the dog is having an animal experience of his surroundings, and we are having a human one. An animal has an animal perception of the animal realm, as the hell being has his own hell-being perspective of the hell realm. These are mental states, but they are experienced as real.

A third way to understand these three worlds, and perhaps the most practical, is to consider that

"The relative three worlds are just an exaggerated, confusing appearance." Exaggerated, in this context, means that we have granted the relative world a reality that it does not have. Our tendency is to reify appearance, make it into a thing, when it is not a thing but a mental state. We exaggerate in the sense that we impute substantiality, independence, and permanence to things that are insubstantial, dependent, and impermanent. We make real what is not real, mistakenly taking the characteristics that we project onto things as coming from their side. We believe that they are inherent and reside in the objects of perception rather than acknowledging that we are imputing these characteristics. For example, there is no food that is inherently delicious. Some beings may find a food delicious, but others may find it disgusting or neutral.

All characteristics —what is near, far, tall, short, beautiful, ugly, good, bad— are imputed. Characteristics are not inherent. It is easy to see, for example, that our "rules" for things like design, aesthetics, and beauty not only change over time, but vary widely from culture to culture.

The appearance of the relative world is not only exaggerated but also confusing. That is because once we impute the characteristics onto the objects rather than understanding that they come from our perceptions and tendencies, we have blurred the origin of the characteristic. When we impute it as originating in the perceived object, we believe it is independent of us, and we react to it by becoming attached, averse, or indifferent. All three afflicted emotions will lead to karma and suffering. We must remember that the characteristics are ours. For example, a chocolate cookie is not delicious. We impute the deliciousness. It is also important to remember that our lives do not depend on the cookie.

That idea may seem amusing, but when we engage in this exaggeration and confusion with larger things, we end up, literally, going to war. "My country, my ideas, my religion." Imputation that is not recognized leads inevitably to attachment, aversion, and indifference. These are afflictions that are based on the darkness of ignorance: separation and supremacy. Out of that ignorance, we assume the characteristics reside in the object because we see ourselves as separate from it. Therefore, we impute to it what belongs to us. Judgement is another word for imputation. That does not mean that we go through life without discernment. In order to function, we necessarily make discernments, but we must clearly understand their origins.

Again, we must be careful not to confuse relative reality with absolute reality. For example, when we play chess, the horse can only move two spaces forward and one space laterally, or one space forward and two spaces laterally, but that is not true outside the game. However, when you play chess, you cannot say that you have a horse that jumps and runs in all directions —that would not be playing chess. Bishops in chess only move on the diagonal, but if you go to the cathedral here, you will see a bishop who can move in other ways. There are separate realities. We are living in a place that has particular rules of the game, but the rules of this game only apply to *this* game. We are playing the game of *samsara*.

The problem is that we are all too much into the game and believe that the only way to "win" is by prevailing within it. However, this game cannot be won. It is like going to the casino and thinking that, if we keep at it long enough, we will ultimately win. If we could do that, there would be no casinos. Casinos exist because their owners know that, sooner or later, the house always wins. Buddhism teaches that the point is to stop playing, to see that the only way to really win is to get out of the game.

We must look at the game of *samsara* with Right View, and realize that it is a game. When we do that, it is not so serious. There are some people who are highly competitive and become fierce when playing games. They get very upset when they are not winning. We can exist in *samsara* that way too, and many do. But those who take the game as ultimate reality will suffer deeply when they are not winning. However, those who know they are just playing a game are much more able to enjoy it.

There are many people who are not "winning" this game, but are simply enjoying the company of other players. In South India, I saw people who, from our western perspective, should have been crying all day because they were so poor. They knew they were poor, and sometimes they were hungry. But they were much happier than many of the people I see around here who have hundreds of times more wealth and are always miserable. Those peasants in India are not confusing relative reality with absolute reality. They are not confusing the two truths.

Dolpopa continues by saying that, "the absolute three worlds and the Buddha Essence are an indestructible, unimagined, unconfusing appearance." The "absolute three worlds" refers to the fact that all Buddhas have a field of action, a Buddha *kshetra*, often mistranslated as "pure land."

Kshetra means "field of action." The Buddhas are described as having three forms: the *Dharmakaya*, or form of truth; the *Sambhogakaya*, or form of power and glory; and the *Nirmanakaya*, or form of compassion. The historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, is a *Nirmanakaya* Buddha; you can meet the *Nirmanakaya* Buddhas in relative reality. However, it takes a very high level of attainment to perceive the *Sambhogakaya* Buddhas. When we speak about the form of truth, the *Dharmakaya*, there is no perception of difference between self and other, so that is the non-dual, pristine, primordial awareness.

The *Dharmakaya* is True Purity, True Being, True Bliss, and True Permanence, which are the four supreme qualities (*mahaguna*) of ultimate reality, or Buddhahood. The *Dharmakaya* is permanent by essence, because it never changes. The *Sambhogakaya* is permanent by continuity. For example, at night we see the light of stars that are no longer there. If we were closer, we would know that the star does not exist, but since we are here, we see the light. Continuity means that, as long as there are suffering sentient beings, the light of the *Sambhogakaya* Buddhas is visible. It is our distance that creates the need for the light. The *Nirmanakaya* is permanent by sequence. In this eon alone, we will have one thousand *Nirmanakaya* Buddhas —the Buddha Shakyamuni was the fourth.

All the bodies of the Buddha are unborn. In Buddhism, when we say born, we mean born due to karma. In some scriptures, you will find references to the historical Buddha as unborn, but that simply means that He was not forced by karma to take birth. Each of these aspects or bodies is said to have a field of action, a *Buddhakshetra*. What Dolpopa says here is that the fields of action of the Buddhas are "indestructible, unimagined, unconfusing appearances."

There is a strong (and unfounded) belittling of Pure Land teachings and practice in the Western understanding of Tibetan Buddhism. Perhaps this is due to the dominant position of academics and nihilists in "western" Buddhist circles, although there has been connivance by some Tibetan teachers in this misrepresentation of the Dharma as elitist, complex, and "profound" (in the misguided way that human minds think of obscurity as indicative of depth).

There is an enormous body of Tibetan Pure Land literature: sutra translations, commentaries, practices, dharanis, mantras, and prayers of aspiration for birth in Dewachen (Sukhavati), authored by leading lamas of all Tibetan Buddhist lineages (Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu, Jonang, and Geluk), beginning with Guru Rinpoche Padmasambhava in the 8th Century:

> *To the west is Dewachen, where Buddha Amideva dwells. Whoever recalls His Name will be born there. You, too, while recalling His Name, should make prayers. […] Free of doubt, move with a spontaneous vajra leap. In that Buddha Land, within the hollow of a lotus bud, you will be swiftly and miraculously born. Therefore, Noble One, with delight and joy give rise to devotion.*

Kunchen Dolpopa labored long and hard to establish Other Emptiness (*zhentong*) —the view of ultimate reality as empty of all that is insubstantial and impermanent, but full of all permanent Buddha qualities— not out of some quaint philosophical curiosity, but to dispel the doubts of fellow Buddhists regarding the Pure Land. He saw the growing dominance of nihilism as a threat to the excellent Pure Land practice that is the last remaining viable way to enlightenment in this Dharma-Ending Age.

The "absolute three worlds" are the three aspects of the Pure Land: the *Dharmakaya-kshetra* of the fully enlightened *mind* of Amideva, in which dwell the Buddhas and Great Bodhisattvas; the *Sambhogakaya-kshetra* of the unhindered *power* of Amideva, in which dwell the Bodhisattvas; and the *Nirmanakaya-kshetra* of the *compassion* of Amideva, in which dwell aspiring ordinary beings, the non-retrogressing objects of the Buddha's compassion. They are the three Pure Lands into which beings of various grades are reborn upon making the Definitive Aspiration for birth in the field of action (*Buddhakshetra*) of Amideva and reciting the Holy Name, *om amideva hrih*, as instructed by the Buddha Shakyamuni in the Smaller Sukhavati Sutra:

Should good men and good women hear of the teaching of Amideva and assiduously recite the Holy Name for one day, two days, three, four, five, six, seven days, or more, then at the end of their lives, Amideva will appear before their very eyes with His retinue of Bodhisattvas and saintly disciples from Dewachen (Sukhavati). For that reason, in their last moment they will be without anxiety, and Amideva will welcome and escort them forthwith to be born in Dewachen.

It is important to notice the word "appearances." Dolpopa does not say that the Pure Lands exist in and of themselves, but that they manifest for the benefit of beings. Even though they are appearances, they are absolute in the sense that they are indestructible for as long as they are necessary, as long as they benefit beings. As long as beings are in need of wisdom and compassion, the activities of the Buddhas remain unconfusing and eliminate confusion.

Dolpopa refers to the fact that this experience that we have is confused. It is imputed. It is an exaggeration. But he is also warning us not to go to the other extreme, which is deprecation (to make something less than what it is), or even further to absolute negation. The solution to exaggeration is not negation, because total negation is also an exaggeration. What he says is not to confuse the fact that this experience is unreal, with a denial of absolute reality. In South India when someone engages in exaggeration, they say, "Just because one plate broke, you don't have to eat from the floor for the rest of your life." This means that just because one thing is broken, not all things are broken. That is what nihilists do. They feel betrayed by worldly appearances and conclude that there is no absolute. They are throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater, and all that is left is pure mental speculation.

Dolpopa, then, warns us against exaggeration. We can exaggerate the appearance, or we can exaggerate the denial of appearance. Both are exaggerations, and neither is the Middle Way. The Middle Way is not between existence and non-existence; it is beyond both. That is reflected in the title and content of a great work by our teachers Maitreya and Asanga entitled, *The Middle Beyond Extremes*. The middle *between* extremes is merely a compromise. To go *beyond* extremes transcends extremes. All extremes have one thing in common: they are extreme. All exaggerations are exaggerations. All confusions are confused.

Enlightenment, seeing things clearly as they are, has nothing to do with material conditions like wealth or poverty. Enlightenment is a condition of the mind, not the body. You cannot become enlightened by becoming a prince or by becoming a pauper. Those kinds of distinctions have nothing to do with it; it is beyond both. In the same way, you cannot become enlightened by believing that everything is real, and you cannot become enlightened by believing that everything is unreal. If everything is unreal, then enlightenment itself would be unreal. Enlightenment is the waking up to whatever it is that is, and whatever it is that is not. It is not about choosing sides. That is the meaning of Dolpopa's famous dictum that the Jonang do not take sides. Every side is at best a partial approximation of truth. We must see things as they are. We must perceive the existing as existing and the non-existing as non-existing, without imposing a point of view. Taking sides is a movement to abandon equanimity.

What Dolpopa explains about Buddha Essence arises from human perspective and need. The Buddhas have no need to qualify their reality, but we do. And we qualify that reality according to that which we lack: True Purity, True Being, True Permanence, and True Bliss. That is what interests us as human beings who are impure, who die, who are not even aware of where we are, and who are constantly alternating between temporary happiness and suffering. We cannot hold on to anything here. It is not that those are the qualifiers that the Buddhas would choose for themselves, but they are what we choose for Them, because that is what we most lack. The description is from our point of view, not Theirs.

When Dolpopa says here that, “the absolute three worlds and the Buddha Essence are an indestructible, unimagined, unconfused appearance,” by using the word *appearance*, he does not deny their reality, but says that this is what that truly established existence looks like to us. This is how we perceive it from our point of view, but it is not a denial of its truth. The word *appearance* is not a deprecation of the reality of Buddha Essence or the fields of activity of the Buddhas. Its use is necessary because our only contact with Them is from our perspective in *samsara*.

The imaginary nature is our imputation of characteristics, so “unimagined” means without imputed characteristics. When the Buddhas look at us, They see simultaneously what is and what appears. We only see what appears, but They see both. The Great Bodhisattvas can see things as they appear and as they are, but not simultaneously. So, from the Buddha’s perspective, the view is unimagined. From the human perspective, it is imagined. Many who saw the Buddha failed to recognize Him as a Buddha. His own cousin, Devadatta, saw the Buddha as an enemy. But those imaginary views have nothing to do with the true, unimagined essence of the Buddha. So “unimagined” here refers to the Buddha’s vision, His wisdom.

The best we can do when we have an ordinary mind is to have Right View, which is different from the direct perception of wisdom. Right View is a conceptual understanding of wisdom. That is why we begin the Eightfold Noble Path with Right View. The final factor on the path is Right Concentration, which leads to the wisdom of direct perception. If we could attain wisdom first, there would be no need for the whole path. So, we must begin with Right View, which is a conceptual understanding.

> *And what is the Right View with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions? “There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed. There are fruits and results of skillful and unskillful actions. There is this world and the next world. There is a mother and a father. There are spontaneously reborn beings; there are contemplatives and sages who, faring rightly and practicing rightly, proclaim this world and the next after having directly known and realized it for themselves.” This is the Right View with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions.*
>
> *And what is the Right View that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path? The discernment, the faculty of discernment, the strength of discernment, the analysis of qualities as a factor for awakening, the path factor of Right View in one developing the Noble Path whose mind is noble, whose mind is without effluents, who is fully possessed of the Noble Path. This is the Right View that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.*
> —Buddha Shakyamuni, Great Forty Sutra

SIXTEEN

I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach the intent of the Dharma Wheel of the Four Truths, the Dharma Wheel of No Characteristics, and the Dharma Wheel of Certainty in the Absolute.

> *Nagarjuna, as well as Asanga and Vasubandhu, establish that the Three Turnings (of the Wheel of Dharma) have a single intention.The First Turning describes the relative; it is taught in accordance with the way things appear. There is no proclamation that what appears has true existence within the analysis of how things are. Therefore, these relative teachings are not false. The Second Turning refutes all relative phenomena of samsara and nirvana, but whether Sugatagarbha (Buddha Nature) exists or not is never presented or examined at all. Therefore, the First and Second Turnings do not contradict the Third.In short, the First chiefly describes the relative. In the Second, there is only half the definitive meaning: the lack of true existence of the relative, but not the true existence of the absolute. The Third Turning perfectly establishes the definitive absolute. The examples of appropriately selected medicine for a specific patient and how children learn gradually to write letters illustrate this progression. If the First Turning were to teach "All dharmas are permanent," that would contradict the Sutra of Katyayana. If the Second Turning negated the absolute, that would contradict the Sutra Requested by Maitreya. The sutras and treatises then would have mutual contradictions.*
> —Taranatha, the Ornament of the Great Middle Way (Zhentong Madhyamaka)

This text is probably one of the most straightforward in the entire Handbook. We know that there were three basic cycles of teachings given by the Buddha —not in chronological order, but in terms of thematic grouping. They are known as Wheels of the Dharma. The first turning took place in the Deer Park at Sarnath, Varanasi, where the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths. The second turning on the absence of characteristics took place on Vulture's Peak, near Rajagriha. The third turning on Buddha Nature took place in Vaishali and other locations, and included the sutras that explain the three natures.

The first is the cycle of the Four Noble Truths, the most basic cycle, in which the Buddha presented a very accurate but preliminary description of reality in the world, which includes the law of karma, dependent origination, and the Eightfold Noble Path. The Four Truths are the truth of suffering, the truth of the causes of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path to the cessation of suffering.

This cycle is also called the cycle of cause and effect because in these fundamental teachings, the Buddha establishes the workings of karma, the essence of the Second Noble Truth. Karma is not something mysterious; it is merely action and consequence. The word "karma" means action. Over the years we have given it a meaning it doesn't really have, often thinking karma is synonymous with punishment or retribution. Karma is basically an observation of how things work in the relative world, the world of conventional truth. In this relative world, which our senses, minds, and bodies inform and inhabit, we experience that every cause has an effect, and every effect has a cause. Nothing happens "out of the blue." You cannot point to a single thing that has ever happened that did not have a cause. You cannot point to a single thing that does not produce an effect. Everything that is, has been caused, and everything that happens will produce an effect in this reality.

A teaching known as dependent origination is an expansion of the law of karma and posits twelve links, beginning with ignorance and ending in aging and death. Every action in the relative world has a consequence. Whether it is "good" or "bad" depends on our perspective, but ultimately, all karma binds us to *samsara*. One could say the "good" karma is more binding than "bad" karma, because no one likes bad consequences and sooner or later will do something about them. But good consequences are

pleasant, so we keep indulging, and karma just keeps us going round and round the same cycle of birth, disease, aging, and death.

We do not need to know the specifics of the mechanics of karma to operate within it, in the same way that we can turn on the lights without being an electrician or drive a car without being a mechanic. What we need to understand is the principle. To turn on the light you just need to know how to flick the switch and some basics about light bulbs and fuses. With karma, we do not need to know and cannot know the details, because they are too complex. There are too many causes and conditions working together to generate a specific consequence. No action operates alone, abstracted from other actions; all are interrelated. Every action in and of itself is already a mixture of causes and conditions and contributes to a very complex matrix of causes and conditions.

Many people may think karma is not real or not operating because we see "good" people suffering "bad" outcomes and "bad" people enjoying "good" outcomes. However, just because we do not see the relevant causes and conditions does not mean that they are not there. There is a great deal that we cannot see or know. The lifetime of a human being is so brief. To claim that those causes and effects which we do not see must not exist is great arrogance. Karma is inscrutable in the sense that we cannot figure out the timing or the combination of causes and conditions.

Many people have a very superficial understanding of karma, as if it were some kind of Abrahamic retribution. We know that the quality of the consequence is similar to the quality of the action. A wholesome action will produce a wholesome result, and an unwholesome action will produce an unwholesome result. How that manifests depends on a complex set of situations involving the interaction of both causes and conditions. A cause may be extremely powerful, but if the conditions are not suitable, the effect will not manifest. The classic illustration is a potent seed which is kept in a drawer. The seed is powerful, which is the cause, but if it is kept in a drawer, it will not germinate. It needs soil, water, light, and warmth. Therefore, causes may be powerful, but, until the conditions are suitable, they will not manifest. That does not mean that they go away.

There is another aspect of karma which is perhaps more important than the external consequences which we either see or fail to see. That aspect is that, with every act, there is an internal consequence: the tendency to repeat that act. That consequence is simultaneous with the performance of the act — we do not have to wait for that one. Whenever we have that tendency, it will be expressed, unless we are vigilant to stop it. The good news is that both the internal and external effects of karma can be purified.

Purification of karma requires four things, known as the Four **R**s. The first is **R**egret, which is not shame or guilt, but the recognition that the action is unbeneficial, and we want to undo it. We want to remove it from our mental continuum, just as, if we mistakenly drank poison, we would want to get it out of our body. Once we feel that regret, we need the second R, which is **R**eliance. There are different kinds of poisons, and each type calls for a different elimination route. If we do not know exactly what kind of poison we have taken, then we must rely on a doctor or call the poison control center. In the same way, reliance in purifying our karma refers to depending on the Dharma to find out how to get rid of that particular karmic seed. We seek out those who know: the teacher, the teachings, and our friends on the path.

The third R is **R**esolve, which means that since we recognize that the action is unbeneficial, we will endeavor to eliminate it from our conduct. There are some very strong negative habits, and resolve does not always mean stopping immediately, but moving towards restraint. The Buddha was in favor of harm reduction. If you are doing something negative all the time, and you reduce the frequency, that is a good thing. Not everyone is ready to make sudden, dramatic changes. That is fine, as long as the direction of

change is positive. Resolve is the recognition that this act is not positive for us or for others, and we will abandon it. How we abandon it is a different topic. Some can stop behaviors “cold turkey.” Others make a plan, and the process takes some time. Both are fine.

The final R in purifying our karma is **R**eparation, which can but does not necessarily include going to the offended party with an apology. From the Dharma point of view, reparation means that we engage in beneficial acts and dedicate the merit to those who have been harmed, without necessarily telling them. Telling them is about us and our self-importance. When we ask for forgiveness, it is less for the offended person and more for ourselves. In our lineage, we make daily prayers of dedication, which are offered to all sentient beings because we have harmed them all at some time or another. The mere fact that we view them as separate from and less important than ourselves is the first and most fundamental offense.

The second cycle is the Dharma Wheel of No Characteristics. This is the cycle of teachings in which the Buddha helped us realize that all our experiences are internal, mental representations; that we perceive in our minds and have no direct contact with anything external. All the characteristics and qualities that we impute or project onto other beings, things, and situations are ours. Is there such a thing as intrinsic beauty? When we find someone or something beautiful or ugly, that thing or person is ugly or beautiful to us. Even if many humans agree on something, that simply means that because of our common karma as humans, we may see things in a similar way. We may see a body of water as something to be avoided, crossed, or even feared, but a fish will see it differently. We do not agree with other sentient beings that share our environment about the characteristics of most things. We may see a hole in the ground and think of it as a danger, while another sentient being sees it as home. When we perceive a characteristic, the characteristic is in us. Why is this important? All the disagreements that we have ever had with others arise from believing that characteristics are inherent, and the most dangerous imputed characteristic is “mine.” We can trace every single conflict to imputed characteristics, reified as if they were real. We must understand that all characteristics are imputed, projected. The cycle of No Characteristics teaches us that nothing has characteristics from its own side. The Buddha taught that we must acknowledge that our likes and dislikes are ours, and have little to do with reality.

Once we know that, then we can function according to what is beneficial for ourselves and others. The problem with characteristics is not that they arise in our minds, but that we believe them to be true. We must understand our minds and know what they automatically do. Our mental default settings are our karmic tendencies. We can trust that our minds will go to the default of imputing characteristics, and we can program around that. These defaults are not all bad. They also allow us to function. We must know what they are and know when we should avoid them, and when we must interpret them. We must look at the consequences of our actions, not the imputed characteristics. We should always take a mental step back and ask, “Is this beneficial?”

In this sense, the Wheel of No Characteristics is an expansion of the teaching on karma. It encourages us to discern the basis for our actions, and cautions us not to predicate our actions on the characteristics that we ourselves project. This is an important caution, because, unfortunately, as a species, we have murdered millions upon millions of sentient beings based on characteristics that we have imputed onto them. We often use the excuse of truth and justice, which results in neither and exposes our actions in a very harsh light. It is very important to pay attention to the possible consequences of our actions. Because we knew they were beneficial, we have all done things that we did not enjoy. We have all refrained from things that we liked because we knew they were not beneficial. If we did only what feels good, we would all be on drugs. The Buddha teaches us to ask the question: “What are the consequences to ourselves and all beings?”

The third turning of the wheel of Dharma is the Wheel of Certainty in the Absolute. When we go deeply into the second turning, when we speak about imputed characteristics, there can be the danger of falling into nihilism —the belief that nothing is real or true. After leading us to question our blind belief in the testimony of our senses and our minds, the Buddha then gave very extensive teachings on the absolute. The creations and perceptions of the ordinary mind are not truly established; they are not real. However, that does not mean there is no absolute truth. This is where the Buddha differentiates the kinds of emptiness.

Emptiness does not mean nothingness. Emptiness means that something lacks permanence, substance, and independence. There are three basic kinds of emptiness (there are other, more extensive classifications). The first is Self-Emptiness, which is the fact that what we believe to be "I" has no intrinsic existence. It is just a collection of aggregates: form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness; body and mind. The second is Phenomenal Emptiness, which is the fact that the objects of our perception lack inherent existence. Every one of our experiences is insubstantial, impermanent, and dependent on causes and conditions, and is therefore empty. Everything we perceive, because it is an internal mental representation, is not substantial —it is an image only, generated in the mind.

The third kind of emptiness is Other Emptiness, which refers to a state in which all that is insubstantial, impermanent, and dependent is removed and what remains is absolute reality. It is empty of all that is other than itself. The idea that Self-Emptiness is all there is would be a very limited view. We can deny the reality of our perceptions, but cannot deny the reality that we have those perceptions. How do we have perceptions? If the ultimate truth were that there is no ultimate truth, there would be no experience. Where would anything come from? If the ultimate truth were that there is no ultimate, on what basis does illusion exist? If illusion exists in and of itself, then illusion would be ultimate truth. That conclusion is the final destination of all nihilists. They then fall into the rankest form of materialism. Speaking only logically, how can some logicians make the determination that everything is relative and conditioned? Is that not an absolute statement which refutes their own view? There must be an absolute, a ground, a basis of all.

Dolpopa asserts that the ultimate is our Buddha Nature with all its qualities: True Purity (selfless, formless, wishless), True Being (self-arisen, boundless, infinite), True Bliss (great purpose, infallible skill, irresistible power), and True Permanence (untiring activity, inseparable qualities, unalterable essence). These are the four qualities of ultimate reality, the *mahagunas*, and that is what the third turning of the Wheel of Dharma is about.

Had the Buddha begun with the third turning before giving us the teaching on no characteristics, we would just reify our own ideas of ultimate reality. If He had not first challenged our views about what is real, but simply given the teaching that there is True Purity and True Being, we would merely impute those characteristics on our illusions. When we move into a new house, we should clean it out before we bring in our possessions. We do not put on fresh clothes before taking a shower. We must do away with wrong view before we can have Right View. Otherwise, the wrong view will be mixed with the Right View.

At every moment, we must remember our great teacher, Nagarjuna, and his warning: "Not this, not that, not both, not neither." He is warning us that the ordinary human mind is incapable of perceiving reality as it is. Anything we say about reality is partial and, in that sense, provisional. All our opinions are necessarily one-sided, even when they are about absolute truth. He says that absolute truth is not exactly like this, or like that, or like bringing both together, and it is not neither of them. We do have Buddha Nature, and we can perceive reality directly, but we must first purify the mind. Unless we purify the mind —discard all wrong views and afflicted emotions— we cannot see clearly. Once all that is

removed, we can see reality clearly. However, can we speak about it clearly after we have experienced it? No. Human language does not rise to that level.

Our karma is to have the minds, the senses, and the limitations that we have, but we also have Dharma. Dharma, in this sense, is our duty to ourselves and to others to get rid of the karma, because it is not beneficial —the good and the bad. The bad karma we purify, and good karma we dedicate to the benefit of all beings. Enlightenment cannot be achieved. Enlightenment is. All we do in the Dharma is apply skillful means to do nothing! Basically, we stop doing and start being what we actually are. We must go the roundabout way to manifest that which we already are.

There are actions that lead to where we want to go and others lead where we do not want to go. Many people think that when they first start practicing the Dharma, they are going to be happy. Eventually, yes. However, when we first meet the Dharma and the truth of suffering, we begin to notice suffering, our own and others, much more acutely. In a very real sense, Dharma in the beginning is a realization — not that the suffering wasn't always present, but we were just so used to it, we didn't even notice how much it hurt. It is sad because all suffering is self-imposed; literally it is an imposition from the false self. This recognition can be overwhelming in the beginning.

Right now, we do not have the skill or the power to stop all the suffering that comes to our awareness. Eventually, our understanding of suffering is what creates the motivation for enlightenment. This motivation is called *bodhicitta*, the mind of enlightenment. That is the mind that looks at the suffering of all and says, "I need the wisdom, the skill, and the power to stop this for everyone."

There needs to be a progression in the teachings. If we did not have the Wheel of No Characteristics, we could never avoid what is so sadly repeated throughout human history. Some of the greatest mass murderers in history were trying to fix things, believed they had the right idea, and were doing what needed to be done. Hitler thought he was doing the world a favor —so did Genghis Khan, Stalin and Mao and Pol Pot and the hierarchs of the Inquisition. Understanding the second turning of the Wheel of Dharma is absolutely important, because without it, we will believe our own opinions. They are valid only insofar as they are our opinions. Are they valid enough to impose on others? No. People have the right to accept and follow the path of their choice. We may agree or disagree, but we cannot impose. Actually, we cannot impose goodness or freedom. That is a violation of another's will. We can answer questions if asked. We can provide an example.

However, we are not at all helpless, because when we change our minds, we change the world. This is a fundamental teaching of the Buddha. All our experience of the world is in our mind, so if we change our mind, we change our world. If we all change our minds for the better, we transform the world. The Buddha said not to look away from suffering, but know there is cessation of suffering, and there is a path to the cessation of suffering. *Samsara* cannot be made into paradise, but our experience can change, and the experience of others can change. Because *samsara* is unreal, an imaginary fabrication, it can and will end. The world will not follow the designs and projections of our imagination. We must allow our perception to correspond to what is, rather than to try and make things correspond to our perceptions. All our experiences are internal mental representations, but If we say to ourselves, "I am imputing these characteristics," then we allow for the possibility that things might not be as they appear to us, and that is the moment when we can actually see. When we question our perceptions, we open the space to see reality as it is; not how we want it to be, or fear it may be, but as it is. That is possible because we have Buddha Nature.

The Lamas "who teach the intent" of the turnings of the Wheel of Dharma are teaching us to apply them in our own lives. The intent is not that we just know about them. The intent is not that we become Buddhist scholars. The intent is that we understand how this applies to us. In the First Wheel, we learn

that if we commit unwholesome acts, we will experience unwholesome consequences; if we perform wholesome acts, we will experience wholesome consequences. The intent is to improve our behavior. The intent of the second turning is to teach us to check our perceptions. The intent of the third turning is to know our reality. Without checking our conduct and our perceptions, we will not have a glimpse of our true being. These are the things that are blocking the perception and the manifestation of our true nature. Remember the intent of these teachings is to benefit ourselves and others. The intent is not for us to be popular at Buddhist cocktail parties, but to reduce our suffering and the suffering of others.

> *In the case of the knowledge gained from hearing the Dharma, disciples rely upon the literal meaning of a teaching without really understanding its intent or making it clear. They move toward liberation without being able to realize the meaning that brings about that liberation.*
>
> *In the case of the knowledge gained from contemplation, disciples also rely upon the teaching, but not just on the words, for they are able really to understand its intent. But they are not yet able to make that intent clear, and, although they turn toward liberation, they are yet unable to realize the meaning that brings about that liberation.*
>
> *In the case of the wisdom gained from cultivation, disciples both rely upon the teaching and do not rely upon the teaching, they both follow the words and do not follow the words, for they are able really to understand its intent. […] They turn toward liberation well and are able to realize the meaning that brings that liberation about.* —Buddha Shakyamuni, Samdhinirmochana Sutra

SEVENTEEN

I bow at the feet of the Lamas who, with the nectar stream of the Three Wheels in sequence, clean the three coarse, subtle, and extremely subtle stains to obtain the sublime jewel of the Truth Form separated from stain.

We have discussed the fact that the teachings of the Buddha are divided into three thematic cycles. The first cycle corresponds to the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Noble Path, which together comprise a fundamental introduction to the Dharma. The second cycle is referred to as the Wheel of No Characteristics, for here we start understanding how the mind works and that all the characteristics that we claim to perceive in other beings and objects are just internal mental representations. Nothing in our experience has inherent characteristics. What is beautiful to us is what we find beautiful and will not necessarily agree with the perceptions of others. All characteristics are imputed. Even those that we tend to believe are absolute, like what is right and wrong, depend on our opinions. I am not talking about ultimate realities here. None of us deal with ultimate realities, but with internal perceptions. We cannot stand outside of our own minds and look objectively at the world. Who would be looking, and where would we be standing? The Wheel of No Characteristics begins to show us that what we believe to be real, substantial, permanent, and independent realities, are, in fact, empty of substance, permanence, and independence.

Being "empty of substance" refers not to the reality of things in themselves, but to our perceptions and experiences of the world, which are entirely internal. Unless our minds create the image and register an experience, we do not have an experience. Images are not substantial. When we see an elephant, is there a physical elephant actually inside our minds? No, only the image of an elephant is in our minds. Right now, we may be thinking of an elephant, but the image is insubstantial and fleeting. It is also dependent on our previous experiences. If we have only seen Indian elephants, we will not be able to mentally produce an African elephant, and if we have only seen Disney versions, our mental elephant will look like Dumbo. Please understand that we are not describing the objective world, but our experience of the world and its entirely imputed characteristics.

The third cycle is the Wheel of Certainty in the Absolute. This cycle of teachings is necessary because, if we go too deeply into the Wheel of No Characteristics, we end up creating an intractable problem for ourselves. When we understand that all the qualities we see in things and people are imputed, there is a tendency to say that nothing is real and to deny that there is ultimate truth or reality. Therefore, the Buddha has an entire cycle of teachings in which He speaks of absolute reality. It is not difficult for most people to understand why absolute reality is necessarily so. Very often we use metaphors. We might say, for example, "this is a bull of a man." We know that he is human and not a bull, and that the statement may be figuratively, but not literally, true. However, we could not create the metaphor if there were no real bulls or real men. The point is, for there to be imputed, false, or imaginary characteristics, there must be a basis. Without the basis, there would be nothing to speak of or to experience. There would be no need for the path and no enlightenment.

There is ultimate reality, and that reality has limitless qualities. But to make it easier, those characteristics are summarized as the four great qualities, the *mahagunas*: True Purity (not contaminated with any imaginary or dependent conditions), True Being (not an imputed entity), True Bliss (not characterized by suffering), and True Permanence (not arising or subsiding). Thousands of other qualities can also be considered, but these four are essential.

In this text, Dolpopa says that the three cycles of teachings must be taught in sequence. When we visit a three-story building, we must enter the first floor, climb to the second, and then reach the third. That does not mean that we cannot hear the full Dharma, but we must be ready to understand what we are

competent to understand. None of us knows consciously the level at which we are ready to meet the Dharma. There are those who are ready from the very first day to hear beyond the first turning to the second or even the third turnings. The sequence is not temporal; it accords with the need and capacity of the listener. But there is a sequence, and the skillful teacher can and will direct individuals to practice at the level for which they are ready. Without hearing the Dharma in sequence, without the fundamentals provided at the base of the building, practitioners cannot fully understand what follows, just as one cannot fly, but must walk up the steps to the third floor.

What are the coarse stains that Dolpopa mentions here that are first cleansed by teaching the cycles in sequence? The first cycle is about karma, and the coarse stains are unskillful actions. If one wants to reduce and eventually eliminate suffering, one must stop creating the causes of suffering. The most exterior causes of suffering, the negative, unskillful acts, are the coarse stains. Therefore, in the First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma, the Buddha focuses on conduct, which includes Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. These are the basis. Sadly, it is now fashionable to jump over them.

My Lama used to say that, in the West, we no longer have the Eightfold Noble Path but the "twofold shortcut" of mindfulness and meditation. Although some sort of secular mindfulness and meditation may be conceivable, Right Mindfulness and Right Meditation, the last two components of the path, are not possible without Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, and Right Effort. It is not because I say so or do not want further cultivation to be possible; it is that it simply cannot happen. If one keeps throwing gasoline into a fire, it will not stop burning. What kind of mindfulness or meditation (*samadhi*, which means mental stability) can we have if we are harming ourselves and other sentient beings? So, the coarse stains are those caused by karma: intentional actions of thought, word, and deed. Negative actions have negative consequences. The first thing, then, is to stop generating harm for ourselves and others.

What are the subtle stains? The coarse stains are the karma that must be stopped, and the subtle stains are the afflicted emotions that are behind the unskillful actions. Notice that the progression of stains begins with harmful action/karma and is associated with the first cycle of Dharma. The afflicted emotions, which are the subtle stains, are associated with the second cycle of Dharma, because aversion to the unpleasant, attachment to the pleasant, and indifference to the rest can only be stopped by understanding that we are the authors of the characteristics that we find pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. Things are not pleasant or unpleasant in themselves; they are so only to us. Understanding that these characteristics are in our minds means that we can change them. We can understand that this is how something appears to us, but that is not necessarily the way it is. We can change our perceptions. For example, we impute the motivations of others all the time, but we really do not and cannot know someone else's mind. In the second cycle, we wash away the subtle stains, which arise from the false but very strongly held belief that things have inherent characteristics.

What are the extremely subtle stains? The coarse stains are the actual, unskillful actions; the subtle stains are the afflicted emotions; and the extremely subtle stains are wrong views. There are thousands of wrong views, and one can accumulate them, but underlying all of them are two main wrong views: separation and supremacy. Separation is the wrong view that we are permanent, distinct, and separate from other beings and other things, that we stand apart and are not part of the whole. The view that is attached to separation is the view of supremacy: that if we are separate, we must watch out for our own interests, which are different from the interests of others. These two wrong views are also called self-grasping (grasping at a self that does not exist) and self-cherishing (putting oneself before all others and promoting one's own interests). Those are the extremely subtle stains.

We begin removing wrong action, then afflicted emotions, and then wrong views —and they must be dealt with in that order. It is not a question of being ready in the sense of being prepared to accept certain teachings. In terms of practice, Dolpopa suggests that the cleansing of stains needs to happen in a particular order because it is not possible to eliminate afflicted emotions or wrong views while maintaining the activities that emanate from them. How can we say, for example, that we have rid ourselves of the wrong view of separation, but continue to kill other sentient beings because that appears to be in our own self-interest? The act itself is a proof of maintaining the wrong view of separation. If we keep acting in unskillful ways, those acts create both external and internal consequences. The internal consequence is the tendency to repeat the wrong action. How can we eliminate wrong views while we engage in the unskillful actions that support and emanate from the wrong view? We see, because of this, entire official religions dedicated to preaching beliefs that they do not practice. I do not exempt many Buddhists from that hypocrisy, either.

A conceptual understanding of Right View is the first step, but it is not sufficient. In the beginning, what we do about Right View is to accept it provisionally and put it into practice. To actually understand Right View, we need to implement the other components of the path. Right View is the provisional acceptance of the Wisdom that the Buddha gives us, and Wisdom at the end of that path is what we see directly for ourselves. Right View is at the beginning of the path, and Wisdom is at the end of the path. Putting Right View into practice means practicing Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. If we do not act on Right View, we lose it.

Changing behavior is essential. The guidance is good as a direction, but we must start moving or we will lose the direction. This happens to entire religious movements that claim to be moving in one direction, while we see them clearly going somewhere else. That is why the Buddha gave us the precepts. Eventually, we should have our own moral compass, but we must begin with the Five Precepts: do not kill, do not steal, do not engage in abusive sexual activity, do not lie, and do not become intoxicated to the point where we commit other unskillful acts. This is very straightforward, but without this base of Right Conduct, we may think that we understand a higher view, but we cannot truly understand. That is the point that the Buddhist teachers have made over and over. Until we change our minds, which can only be changed through action, no real understanding is possible. We can have a glimpse, but we need to start doing, and that is what Dolpopa means by cleaning the stains in sequence. True practitioners are described by the Buddha thus:

> *They give up killing sentient beings, they renounce the rod and the sword, they're scrupulous and kind, living full of compassion for all living beings.*
>
> *They give up stealing. They don't, with the intention to commit theft, take the wealth or belongings of others from villages or wilderness.*
>
> *They give up sexual misconduct. They don't have sexual relations with those who have their mother, father, both mother and father, brother, sister, relatives, or clan as guardian. They don't have sexual relations with those who are protected on principle, or who have a spouse, or whose violation is punishable by law, or even one who has been garlanded as a token of betrothal.*
>
> *They give up lying. They're summoned to a council, an assembly, a family meeting, a guild, or to the royal court, and asked to bear witness: "Please, say what you know." Not knowing, they say "I don't know." Knowing, they say "I know." Not seeing, they say "I don't see." And seeing, they say "I see." So, they don't deliberately lie for the sake of themselves or another, or for some trivial worldly reason.*

They give up divisive speech. They don't repeat in one place what they heard in another so as to divide people against each other. Instead, they reconcile those who are divided, supporting unity, delighting in harmony, loving harmony, speaking words that promote harmony.

They give up harsh speech. They speak in a way that's mellow, pleasing to the ear, lovely, going to the heart, polite, likable and agreeable to the people.

They give up talking nonsense. Their words are timely, true, and meaningful, in line with the teaching and training. They say things at the right time which are valuable, reasonable, succinct, and beneficial.

They don't covet the wealth and belongings of others: "Oh, if only their belongings were mine!" They have a kind heart and loving intentions: "May these sentient beings live free of enmity and ill will, untroubled and happy!"

They are loving and live with their hearts full of love. They're kind and live with their hearts full of kindness.

They have such a view: "There is meaning in giving, sacrifice, and offerings. There are fruits and results of wholesome and unwholesome deeds. There is an afterlife. There are duties to mother and father. There are beings reborn spontaneously. And there are renouncers and sages who are well attained and practiced, and who describe the afterlife after realizing it with their own insight."

We clean the stains to "obtain the sublime jewel of the Truth Form separated from stain." This is absolutely important. We are not building something we do not already have. We are not constructing our Buddhahood or generating a new, true nature. We are merely removing the coarse, subtle, and extremely subtle stains that cover up our true nature. If we had to create something different from what we are, we could not do it. If Buddha Nature were not our nature right now, we would not be able to make any progress. This is a process of uncovering, not a process of generating. Which is easier, to clean a dirty diamond or to make a diamond? In our world system, a real diamond takes thousands of years to form. But we do not have to go through all that.

All sentient beings have the diamond of Buddha Nature, so all that we have to do is clean away the coarse, subtle, and extremely subtle incidental stains. The most external stains are our unskillful actions. Under that are afflicted emotions, and under that are wrong views. We eliminate killing, stealing, lying, abusing, and intoxication, which helps us eliminate attachment, aversion, and indifference, and that helps us eliminate the two wrong views of separation and supremacy. Finally, what we come to is the non-dual, non-referential, Pristine Nature. The first action is Right Intention, and that is when we provisionally accept Right View and look at the world and try and see how it would look if we accepted the view. That contemplation is already an action, a transformation, which most people do not bother to do. In one ear and out the other. Many people will hear the Right View, but will never take any action to uphold it. When we hear a teaching, we must apply it, and that process involves contemplation.

Contemplation means that once we hear, we must make the teaching our own. First, we define what it means to us. Second, we articulate it, as if we were sharing it with others. Third, we ground it in experience, applying the teaching to situations in the past, the present, and near future. Fourth, we rest and integrate the teaching in meditation. These four steps are all mental, and they are elements of Right Intention. Many people hear, but they do not contemplate and do nothing about what they hear.

There are very rare individuals, called solitary realizers (*pratyekabuddhas*), who look at reality, see suffering, and without directly hearing the Dharma, attain a measure of enlightenment. Most of us, however, need to hear the Dharma, and for those rare solitary realizers and for us too, suffering is the

true motivation for action. Why do we come to hear the Dharma? We come because we realize that something is not right; we are suffering. So, we come, and we hear. But the Buddha tells us not to accept anything just because we hear it, even if we hear it from the Buddha Himself. He also said, however, to go and test what we hear against our reason and experience, and if it is beneficial, to adopt it and abide in it. If it is not beneficial, leave it aside, but if it is beneficial, we must practice it. Otherwise, it will go away. How permanent is a thought? Unless it turns into something more substantial, it will not last one-sixtieth of a finger snap. We hear, we internalize, and then act in the world.

The Eightfold Noble Path is part of the First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma. The Buddha shared it with all and encouraged all to try it because it is beneficial. To know if it is beneficial, one must try it. Practice is essential. We must live up to the level of our highest view; otherwise, our view will drop down to the level of our base conduct. We are self-justifying animals and like to believe that what we are already doing must be right. To live up to our highest view takes effort.

When the Bodhisattvas look at an ordinary being, they see, as we do, the ordinary being, but they do not believe that appearance. They do not accept that false appearance as real, but see the Buddha Nature of that being. For us who are habituated to taking appearance as reality, it takes training and effort to look at beings we do not like and say, “This being has Buddha Nature.” That takes constant effort. Real practice is in everyday life. When we meet the disagreeable people, that is the best occasion for practice. When others are kind, it is easy to reciprocate their kindness. But real practice is to meet the unpleasant person and recognize that she has Buddha Nature. It takes practice and effort to meet the roach, the wasp, and the scorpion that frighten us and know, those beings have Buddha Nature.

My extremely kind Lama was speaking once about Buddha Nature to a small group, and a young Tibetan man told him that it was so easy in his presence to understand Buddha Nature, but “out there” it was very difficult. My teacher told him, “Then I have failed you. I am not preparing you properly.” Jonang monastics are grateful that we were thrown out of our monasteries in the sixteenth century. It is very easy for monks and nuns to become detached from reality. My Lama used to say that we need monastics —but not ensconced in monasteries forever. We need monastics to go into the world where lay people live. We need to practice with each other. It is not in special, controlled environments where we make progress; it is at the market, on the road, in the office, at home with our families that we live the Dharma.

EIGHTEEN

I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach people who accept external objects that everything is mind, who teach the Middle Way of no appearance to those who are attached to mind, and who teach the Great Middle Way of perfect appearance to those who accept no appearance.

There is a term that is used in comparative Buddhist studies called doxography, and it is the positioning of different schemes. In that system, we have schools of Buddhism that accept certain phenomena as real; for example, "indivisible" physical atoms and moments of time. There are schools that say that nothing external is true —it is all mind— but accept the mind as real. Then there is a school that is very reductive, but provides an important critique of all the previous ones, that says that nothing is real. (Regrettably, instead of saying that no *thing* is real, they say that *nothing* is real, and there is a difference.) Then there is the Great Middle Way, that says that no *thing* is real, but Buddha Nature is truly established. These differences are what Dolpopa mentions here.

VEHICLE	SCHOOL	NOT ESTABLISHED (FALSE)	TRULY ESTABLISHED (REAL)
Sravakayana *Hearer's Vehicle*	***Vaibhashika*** *Great Exposition* **Realism**		• Compounded phenomena • Uncompounded phenomena • Conventional phenomena • Ultimate phenomena
Sravakayana *Hearer's Vehicle*	***Sautrantika*** *Sutra* **Subtle Realism**	• Gross objects • Continua • Uncompounded phenomena • Non-associated compositional factors	• Present minute particles • Present moments of consciousness
Mahayana *Great Vehicle*	***Chittamatra*** *Mind Only* **Idealism**	• Continua • Uncompounded phenomena • Non-associated compositional factors	• Consciousness devoid of apprehended object and apprehending subject
Mahayana *Great Vehicle*	***Madhyamaka*** *Middle Way* **Self- Emptiness**	• Compounded phenomena • Uncompounded phenomena • Conventional phenomena • Ultimate 'phenomena'	The *Svatantrika* sub-school affirms that ultimate reality is self-empty through logical reasoning, while the *Prasangika* implies that ultimate reality is self-empty through reduction to absurd consequences.
Mahayana *Great Vehicle*	***Maha Madhyamaka*** *Great Middle Way* **Other Emptiness**	• Compounded phenomena • All adventi- tiously posited • uncompounded phenomena • Self-emptiness	• Buddha Nature • Self-cognizing, self-illuminating pristine wisdom • All ultimate Buddha qualities primordially indwelling intrinsically • Immutable thoroughly established nature • Other Emptiness

We need to look at something that has been discussed brilliantly by our great teacher Vasubandhu, which is the doctrine (doctrine means teaching, and is not to be confused with dogma) of the three natures. The three natures are a way of seeing reality. They are the imaginary nature, the dependent nature, and the truly established nature. Let us take the classic example of mistaking a coiled rope for a snake. When we are in our fearful mind, and we see a coiled rope and take it for a snake, does the snake exist? It is imaginary. However, we are not just conjuring a snake without any basis. The rope and its circumstances are the dependent nature —that is, dependent on causes and conditions. The rope was produced, it was coiled, it was placed in a certain place, and there were certain internal and external conditions that caused us to mistake it for a snake.

But we can go further than that, analyze the rope, and see that "rope" is a label or a concept. The rope is composed of strands, and what are they? They are fibers, which are composed of other things, down to the atomic level. So ultimately, there is no such thing as "rope". We come to the understanding, which the Buddha explained 2600 years ago, and which Western science has recently discovered, that the rope is mostly space, and there is almost nothing substantial there. Therefore, the lack of substantial, independent, or permanent existence is the established nature of the experience of the rope that looks like a coiled snake. We first thought it was a snake, then we saw it was a rope, and then we saw that the rope was simply a label or a concept. There have been and probably still are people who have no concept of "rope." In order to recognize a rope, we must have the concept of rope. Without the concept, the rope may be there, but it is something else for us, not a rope. The mind that perceives the rope is also a concept. Where and what is the mind? Is it substantial, independent, and permanent? This is the mistake that the idealists make in their belief that everything is a mental phenomenon, but who then fail to apply that analysis to the mind itself. Apparently, to them, everything is mental except the mind! What Dolpopa says here is that idealism is an improvement over believing there is a snake, or even believing there is something that is conceptually a rope, but it is still not the truly established nature, because the mind also is insubstantial, impermanent, and dependent.

We have the ability to look at reality, but we are not able to turn a switch on or off and actually see the truly established nature. Our position is very much like that of a magician performing a stage trick who is not fooled by his or her trick, but still sees what others see. Like the audience, the magician sees the hat and the rabbit, but he is not fooled by the rabbit's appearance, because he knows that he put the rabbit in the hat before the show. We know that we see the things that others see, but we also know that we impute the characteristics —WE think a wall is solid, or an object is far or close, pretty or ugly. We are imputing all the characteristics. Beings with X-ray vision would not see the wall as solid, because they have another type of vision. With our vision, we see a solid wall. When I was a child, I did not know that my vision was poor. I saw everything blurry and beautiful, and all became harsh and ugly once I got eyeglasses. Before putting them on, everything was soft and sparkly. I imputed mistiness on the world. Wearing glasses, I had to stop doing that.

All that we perceive is a projection of our sense limitations, our emotional distortions, our labels and concepts, our previous experiences, and our habitual tendencies. It is actually a fabrication of our karma. We got our bodies and our minds through karma —the consequences of previous actions— so we have an experience of the world which is mostly contrived by us. All sentient beings in duality fabricate our experience in a very clear way. I am not using the word "fabricate" lightly. We are literally constructing our experiences. Then we reify them and turn them into things and say, "This is the way it is," without realizing that this is just the way it is *for us*. It is our perspective, our perception, our opinion.

When we speak of karma and karmic formations, there are common formations and uncommon, or private, formations. We belong to the human species because of our common karmic formations, and that means we have comparable abilities and tendencies. Therefore, we have very similar ways of seeing and reacting. Because our karmic formations gave us these human bodies, we have certain parameters. For example, our internal body temperature can only change by a few degrees or death will occur. We have variation within the group, but there are things that are not possible for us. Humans do not fly or breathe underwater. The inability to fly or breathe underwater are consequences of having these bodies and these minds. Other species have other limitations. In our arrogance, we claim that we can explain the universe, but our explanations are not reality; they are simply the way we experience it.

The human mind is not so sophisticated, and common karmic formations are fairly obvious. When we understand that, we can set our own agenda. We can choose what we see and choose what we hear and choose who we surround ourselves with, because that is what we are reinforcing in our mind. Those will be the karmic formations we have chosen to support. Once we understand, it is not that difficult to advance: just make better choices. Everything begins in the subtle realm, which is thought. If we find that changing something physical is difficult, then begin by changing the thought, because that is much more malleable. For example, if we are designing a building, when is it easier to change the type of window, in the planning stage or after it is built? In the planning stage, we just erase and redraw, but if we wait until it is built, we have a major effort and mess and expense to make that change.

We have a mind that is predisposed to analysis of a particular kind. Our minds are incapable of holding two opposite ideas simultaneously. That is the source of all our science, logic, philosophy, and language. This mental limitation is the source of everything that we have ever conceived. Similarly, no matter how great we are at chess, we are restricted to the board, the pieces, and the rules. We cannot be great chess players and move in ways that are disallowed in the game. We are stuck with the particular pieces and rules. Likewise, we are playing the human game, and that game comes with rules, which we could call the common formations. Within that game there are a variety of players —some are sneaky, defensive, aggressive, etc.— and we can call these the uncommon formations. But there is, nonetheless, the same board, rules, and pieces. We can rebel against the game, but that is a false rebellion, because rebelling happens within the game. If we are playing chess, we can put our king down, but that is all we can do. We can win, or lose, or forfeit the game, but as long as we are in the game, we do not have other options. The only deliverance is enlightenment, which means we stop playing the game.

However, we must make a clear distinction here. We cannot turn the game off. We still have these bodies and minds, so we become aware of the rules of the body and the rules of the mind and use them as effectively and efficiently as possible. Walking away from the game does not happen while we have these bodies. These bodies are still here, but we push back from the game by not buying into it. We can take it all very seriously and become extremely upset when the game does not go our way, but we do not have to do that. We can get very upset when something challenges our identity, but we can step back from that, while remaining within the scope of what is possible.

There are limitations to human experience that we must recognize. Unfortunately, most of us are wedded to the imaginary nature. We are stuck on the most external and superficial view of reality. We cling to the imaginary nature because, even if it is false, it is familiar. It is what we would like it to be. We have reached certain conclusions and they become part of our identity. It is very disturbing to have to see how wrong we have been.

When we identify these tendencies of the human mind, we are not defeated, we are not ensnared by imaginary appearances. It is not so complicated. If someone else can wave a carrot in front of us and make us do things, we can wave our own carrot too and go in the direction that we want to go. We can

choose our carrot and choose our direction. The mind will follow the carrot; the questions are, who is waving it and in what direction?

Therefore, when Dolpopa says that he bows to the Lamas who teach those who "accept external objects that everything is mind," he is defining the first step: explaining that objects are not as we perceive them, but are imputed reflections of our physical senses, a mental construct. Then, for people who become "attached to mind" (to thinking that everything is in the mind, and the mind is real), he teaches that "mind" is also a mental fabrication. It is not real either. How can we deny the reality of the so-called external and affirm the reality of that which is its perceiver? If we cannot say that anything out there is real because we are the one imputing characteristics, are we not imputing characteristics to our mind also?

We attempt to live through the grasped (the perceived) and the grasper or perceiver. If one does not exist, how could the other? The classic example given is, "Can one be a parent without a child?" If there is no child, there is no parent. If there is no movement, there is no mover. If there is no perceived, there is no perceiver. What makes a perceiver a perceiver is the act of perceiving. It is also a fabrication. The "I" who is imputing is not there, and that is why it is so hard for us. We are so sure that there is someone here doing all this perceiving, but that "someone here" that is doing the perceiving is ignorance. Ignorance is an absence, not a real entity. Confusion is not a thing. Darkness is not a thing: it is an absence of light. Ignorance is not a thing; it is an absence of wisdom, but we take the absence and reify it as a thing. However, that insight may lead us to nihilism. The reasoning goes: If there is no perceived or perceiver, then there is nothing.

Here the doctrine of the Great Middle Way steps in and says, there is no *thing*, but the perfect appearance is real. The perfect appearance is Buddha Nature; the empty luminosity is real. It is on the basis of the empty luminosity, the truly established, that the dependent and the imaginary are possible. Otherwise, there would be no experience whatsoever. If the perceived and the perceiver are not real, there should be no experience, and yet there is experience. We can deny the validity of experience, but we cannot deny experience. Therefore, there must be a basis. By rational analysis we cannot directly perceive Buddha Nature, but we can affirm Buddha Nature, because without it there would be no experience. Through direct yogic perception, we can actually experience Buddha Nature. This is the Great Middle Way of perfect appearance.

The various schools exist because the Buddha taught three cycles of Dharma. He understood that there is a limit to the capacity of all sentient beings, and those limitations have different scopes. Actually, all these views are helpful. When we say there is a higher view, it does not mean that the other view is not helpful. The view of those who affirm minute particles of matter and time is superior to the general confused view of the world, and it is helpful. The view that all is mind is helpful to those who believe that they experience a world made of external objects. The view that the mind is not real is helpful to people who reify perception. The problem is not that there are different levels of the view, the problem is getting stuck on views. That is why we say that a manifestation of Buddha Nature is to align with the highest view of which we are capable. Align our thoughts, words, and deeds with that view, and by doing that we will come to see its limitations and move on. However, if we only think about it and never practice it, we will not experience its limitations. That is why practice is so important.

> *If we act in an unrestrained manner, we will lose the great benefit of this doctrine. But if, relying upon this Dharma, we correctly cultivate and practice it, we will attain the great awakening.*
> —Buddha Shakyamuni

NINETEEN

I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach inferior disciples the Dharma of cause and result, who teach those that adhere to existence that everything is empty, and who teach the Buddha Essence of Luminosity to those who accept nothing.

All the teachings of the Buddha are skillful means. We should never believe that absolute truth can be proclaimed in words. The ultimate truth is ineffable; it cannot be spoken. If it could be spoken, it would not be absolute. Words are within reality, so how could something within reality encompass all of reality? How can we place something bigger into something smaller? How can we put that which is beyond mental constructs into words that are mental constructs? The classic metaphor for the Dharma is a finger pointing at the moon. We should never confuse the finger with the moon; words point at truth, but they are not the truth. The Buddha said:

> *I have preached that ultimate meaning is realized internally by each practitioner, while reasoning is attained in the give and take of joint discussion among common worldlings. From this principle you should understand that ultimate meaning transcends the descriptions of reasoned meaning.*
>
> *Furthermore, I have preached that ultimate meaning does not function through images, but the functioning of reason does move within the realm of images. From this principle, you should understand that ultimate meaning transcends the descriptions of reasoned meaning.*
>
> *Furthermore, I preach that ultimate meaning is ineffable, but the functioning of reason moves within the realm of language. From this principle, you should understand that ultimate meaning transcends the descriptions of reasoned meaning.*
>
> *Furthermore, I teach that ultimate meaning severs all expression, but the functioning of reason moves within the realm of expression. From this principle, you should understand that ultimate meaning transcends the descriptions of reasoned meaning.*
>
> *Furthermore, I preach that ultimate meaning severs all disputation, but the functioning of reason does move within the realm of disputation about meaning. From this principle, you should understand that ultimate meaning transcends the descriptions of reasoned meaning.*

The teachings of the Dharma have a purpose, which is to direct us to look in a better direction than we were looking before. Even with a finger pointing at the moon, there may be stages of pointing out, each coming a bit more in line with the moon. The Buddha used this approach of stages, and that is why we talk about the three turnings of the Wheel of Dharma. To turn the Wheel means to give a cycle of instruction. The three cycles of instruction that the Buddha gave are not chronological; they are thematic. He gave teachings on the third turning of the Wheel during roughly the same time period that he gave teachings on the first and second turnings.

Very simply stated, the first cycle is mainly concerned with abandoning negative actions of the body, speech, and mind; the second cycle is primarily about abandoning clinging to the “self” of the individual and of phenomena; and the third cycle is about abandoning clinging to emptiness. The Buddha’s teaching is always dependent on the capacity, maturity, and inclination of those who are listening. A person with a doctorate in advanced mathematics is not going to teach the most complex mathematical concepts to a group of infants. The audience dictates to a large extent the appropriate content.

Here Dolpopa tells us the conditions of the three audiences for whom the three cycles are intended. The first group, called “inferior disciples,” refers to those who have not thought things through: plain, ordinary folks who have not figured out that actions have consequences. That group includes the

majority of human beings. Most of us think it doesn't really matter what we do. Look at what we have done to this planet! We have ruined the soil, water, air, and climate. We have literally turned this planet into a dump. No other species has managed to do what we have done: we have contaminated the earth, the oceans, the rivers, the air. No one can deny this fact. There are floating islands of garbage in every ocean in the world, and we have contributed directly to the loss of more animal species than all previous mass extinctions in Earth's history. We are threatening our own extinction.

It is undeniable that we still, as individuals and as a species, have not understood cause and effect. In politics, we have not understood cause and effect. "Developed" countries colonize the world and expect no consequences. They take everyone's oil and land and resources and do not expect any adverse effects. Most people do not think of the consequences of their actions, and I am including all of us here. We do not always consider the effect that our words and actions and attitudes have on other people and how they may react. Nor do we consider what we do to other species. Then we are surprised when "somehow" their fate affects us. Look at what we have done to the bees, yet without them, humans will not survive ten years.

That is why Dolpopa says that, for inferior disciples, it is imperative to teach cause and result. The purpose of the Dharma is not to criticize others. We are the inferior disciples. Do we always stop and consider the consequences of our actions, or do we sometimes just react? How many of us have not felt regret after doing something? Someone offends us, and we offend them back. If we are reasonable people, we should consider whether we have made the situation any better by such a reaction. Reaction without thought of the consequences never makes things better. Reaction is not helpful, but response is different. Responding means that we have considered the consequences. Reaction is automatic; response is thoughtful. Reaction is also problematic because it causes escalation. For this type of audience, it is necessary to teach cause and effect. We must examine ourselves. Do we consider the consequences of our actions all the time? Do we react, or do we respond reasonably? Do we consider the consequences of our daily consumption habits? Where and how do we spend our money, and are we enabling events to continue that we allegedly do not agree with? The Dharma always directs us to look at ourselves.

The second group of disciples are those who "adhere to existence," meaning those who take appearances at face value. We are so enamored of our senses, minds, and the labels that we impute or project upon things. We believe that things that have no substantial, permanent existence, exist. We have reified labels. The classic example of this tendency is a bundle of sticks. How many sticks can I remove from a bundle before it stops being a bundle? Where is the bundle? Bundle is a word. It never existed beyond the label. A forest is just a collection of trees, and the label depends on our idea of how many trees constitute a forest. So, labeling is necessary and helpful to an extent, but not if we think that what we label has a substantial existence.

We also tend to impute motivation and intention to people, but all imputations come from our perception. We impute qualities that are entirely our own onto things and beings, and we kill and are killed because of some of these assigned qualities. Functionally, yes, we need to call things something, but the Buddha teaches us that we must not believe that the labels we put on things actually have a substantial existence. Labels have no relationship to reality. They are useful, but they are not to be believed. Problems arise when we believe they are true. People have had wars over the definition of a word or a boundary line. The Great Christian Schism between East and West, Orthodox and Roman Catholic, happened over the word "*filioque*" (and of the Son) in the Creed, referencing the origin of the Holy Spirit. When we start to impute reality to these things, we take them more seriously than they merit, and we suffer because of the labels we assign.

The most dangerous label is “mine.” What makes something ours? Nothing is really ours; we cannot take it with us. We do not own anything; things own us. The more things we have, the more things we must take care of. We are not free when we have a bunch of things to worry about. The teaching of the second cycle is proposing that we change our view and recognize that things we believe to be truly existent are not. All are merely imputations, and the most dangerous imputation is “me.” It is difficult for most people to understand that our concept of self is also a label with no substance, no permanence, no independence. Our physical body keeps changing. Our body is not the same one we had when we were infants, children, youths, young adults, middle aged, or elderly. The mind also keeps changing. We are not the same person we used to be. Our ideas, thoughts, intentions, and views have changed. How can we believe there to be a permanent self? The self is a story, a character in a plot that we call our life. The Buddha’s teachings are meant to help us function with the labels and concepts we assign in conventional reality while understanding ultimate reality. What the Buddha says is that we must function within conventional reality, but we should not fall for it. We ordinary beings have only glimpses of ultimate reality. What the Buddha shows us in the second turning of the Wheel is not to take appearances at face value.

Buddhism teaches that it is a cause of suffering to believe that the human game we are playing is absolutely real. In conventional reality, we must be like the magician who knows the source and the mechanism of all his tricks, or we will fall for them and be in awe of our own creations. In South Korea, some young people got so addicted to video games that they died from starvation. They were so into the game that it became the only reality. In a similar way, we begin to believe that our participation in the game of life is absolutely real, that we are holding the whole thing together. There are people who feel that if they stop thinking, they will die, and some others who believe that if they stop thinking, the world will die. This is the belief that without the “self” nothing at all will function. In a sense, there is some truth to that. Our world does not exist, as it is only our perception. If we stop thinking, our world will not exist, but it was never real in the first place. It is not substantial, it is not permanent, and it is not independent. That is what “not real” means. Things are not as they appear.

Every one of our perceptions is fabricated by three constraints. The first is our limited sense capacity. We do not see all there is to see or hear all there is to hear, etc. Human sense capacity is extremely limited. There are other beings living among us who have better sense perception than we do. The human eye only perceives one percent of the light spectrum, and yet we are so arrogant to say, “It is true; I saw it with my own two eyes.” The second obstacle is our emotional state, which can easily distort our limited sense perceptions. We can see things that are not there and fail to see things that are there. So, there are both sense limitations and emotional distortions. Finally, the third constraint is conceptual bias. If we do not have a concept for something, we do not know it is there. We give too much credit to our perceptions when they are the product of limited sense capacity, emotional distortions, and narrow conceptual categories. Our perceptions say more about us than about the object perceived. We force our perceptions into our conceptual frameworks or categories.

The second group of listeners are those, then, who need to understand that “everything is empty,” which does not mean that there is nothing. It means there is nothing in our experience that is substantial, permanent, and independent of causes and conditions. Not substantial refers to the fact that all our perceptions are images in our minds and are, therefore, internal representations. Our perceptions do not last, and therefore are impermanent. They are also dependent on both internal and external causes and conditions. That is why the Buddha taught the second turning of the Wheel, the Wheel of No Characteristics.

The final group of listeners are “those who accept nothing.” The Buddha acknowledged the problem that many misunderstood his teachings. One misunderstanding is that, if our perceptions are not

trustworthy, then we must conclude that nothing exists, that all is a mental fabrication. Those who have fallen into the trap of nihilism, that the ultimate truth is no truth, must be taught about Luminosity, Buddha Essence.

How do we see? Even the things that we see incorrectly must be seen in the light. That is why all traditions speak of light, because it is an image that we can all understand. With light, we see. The Buddha Essence of Luminosity is what makes us able to see causes and consequences and the misguided appearances. We cannot even perceive emptiness without luminosity. So, luminosity must be the basis of all; otherwise, we could not even posit nothingness. How would you see it or understand it?

Even though our conventional perceptions can be refuted, the basis that allows them to arise is real. If ultimately there were nothing, why and how would anything manifest? If I say that Mary is not present here, that does not mean that there is no one here. I would not single out Mary's absence if no one else were here. Similarly, what the Buddha taught in the third cycle is that the teachings on emptiness are affirming something, not negating everything. To say that **this** is not real implies that there is reality. How would we be able to negate the reality of something if there were no reality? To negate something, there must be something to negate. We cannot negate nothingness. Conventional reality is imputed, and its appearances are unreal, empty of substance, permanence, and independence, but reality is not empty of Buddha Essence. In our lineage we call this luminosity, "Other Emptiness," which means that it is empty of all that is **not** True Purity, True Being, True Bliss, and True Permanence.

Dolpopa speaks here about the teacher and the need of the teacher to discern the mental state of the listener. Who needs to be taught are all those who have wrong views. Ultimately, we should all become familiar with all the teachings, but our needs are what should determine what we study at a particular time. Our great teacher Nagarjuna said the understanding of "*Emptiness cures all wrong views, but the view of emptiness is incurable*." With emptiness, we can refute all false interpretations and perceptions, but if we reify emptiness to be an ultimate truth, that is ultimate suicide. Therefore, having Right View is the first step.

Right View is the provisional acceptance of the wisdom of the Buddhas, and wisdom is the direct perception of reality as it is. But before we have direct perception, we must, by reason and experience, come to Right View. The Buddha said in the famous Kalama Sutra to not accept things because He said them, but to check the teaching against reason and experience. If it is helpful, the Buddha said, "Enter into it and abide in it." Direct experience cannot be attained right away; therefore, if a teaching makes sense, we accept it provisionally until we have the direct experience of it.

The fundamental purport of this text is that we must place ourselves in the category of the student that is suitable for us. We must know and be honest about our understanding and misunderstanding. We need to dedicate effort to correct that which is our greatest obstacle to cultivation. Dolpopa's teaching in this text is not about pointing fingers at others; it is about us. Am I careful with consequences? Am I reifying all sorts of things that are not really there? Am I denying ultimate reality? What is my greatest obstacle to advancement? When we find the answers to those questions, we need to work with that.

In Sangha, we teach from all three turnings of the Wheel of Dharma all the time, but as individuals we need to work on that which is our greatest obstacle. If it is a lack of awareness of cause and effect, we must work on that. If it is the belief that appearances are true, we must work on that. If there is a lack of certainty in Buddha Nature, we need to work on that. This is something that no one can determine for us. We need to acknowledge our situation and know where we are, and then we can plan our approach to where we want to be.

TWENTY

I bow at the feet of the Lamas who teach the Vehicle of the Hearers to people of inferior faculties, the Vehicle of Solitary Realizers to those of middling faculties, and the sutra and mantra paths of extraordinary cause and result in the Sublime Vehicle, to the Great.

One of the fundamental pedagogical principles of the Dharma exemplified by the Buddha in His 45-year teaching career is that it is the audience that determines the level of the teaching. That may be self-evident to us, but many speakers or teachers have a standard presentation no matter who is in front of them. If you have ever tried to teach, you know that doesn't work well. We must adjust our communication to the maturity, the capacity, and the inclination of the audience. All three are important. Maturity means "Are they ready?" Capacity means, "Can they understand?" Inclination means, "Do they care?" People can be perfectly capable and mature, but if they have no desire, there is nothing the speaker can do about it. All three are extremely important.

What is Dolpopa saying here? The real teachers of the Dharma teach inferior disciples the "Vehicle of the Hearers," which is the Dharma of cause and effect. Inferior does not mean intrinsically lesser, but means that at this point in time the person has limited maturity, capacity, and a weak intention. If we were to place these three elements in a graph, those who do not measure very high on those registers would be inferior disciples. Why do they specifically need to know cause and result? Because that understanding provides a firm basis for increasing their maturity, capacity, and inclination. A mature person is one who takes responsibility for her actions and refrains from blaming others. Understanding cause and effect will enhance a person's inclination, because as soon as we understand cause and effect, we stop the magical and wishful thinking that somebody is going to show up, sooner or later, and solve all our problems.

Believing in magical thinking limits our inclination and maturity, our ability to do what needs to be done. For example, if a child believes that mom is going to come in eventually and clean up her room, she will put up with the mess, knowing that she doesn't really have to do it. The moment she realizes that mom is not coming to clean it up, then she must make the conscious decision to live in the mess or pick it up. Therefore, "cause and result" is a teaching directed at increasing all these aspects: the maturity, the capacity, and the inclination. It is a correction directed at what we need. As long as the levels of these three aspects are low, we must focus on cause and effect. That is why the **Lam Rim** (the teaching on the stages of the path) stresses at the beginning the consequences of our actions. What am I going to do with this precious human birth that is the result of my previous actions? Whatever I decide to do or not do will produce a result. What kind of result do I want?

Many people do not like hearing the specifics in these teachings —the results of not following the precepts, of engaging in unwholesome behavior— but they need to hear it in detail rather than allow it to be a vague, conceptual idea. This is what must be taught, because until the student understands cause and result, there will be no progress. There is a saying in Spanish that goes something like, "It is not the same to call on the devil than to see him approach. (*No es lo mismo llamar al diablo que verlo venir*.)" Sometimes we need to see what we are walking towards or setting in place in this causal series that is our lives. The Lamas, to benefit those at this stage of understanding, know what must be taught to benefit that level of student. People can understand highly complex philosophical questions, but if they do not have a real understanding, an experiential understanding of cause and result, they cannot advance.

Then, after hearing, practice is essential. If we truly understand that fire burns, we do not put our hand in it. It is one thing to have a theoretical understanding, and another to have internal, experiential understanding. Sometimes when we overprotect children they never learn about cause and result. The

child makes the cause, and the parent makes sure the effect doesn't touch them. These children become miserable later in life because they don't understand how the world works. Also, the tendency to make the same mistake is strengthened if we do not experience the result of our actions. Shielding children from the consequences of their actions strengthens their tendency to make mistakes. Nothing weakens the tendency to transgress like having to face the results of our actions. This is not to say that we rule out compassion, but compassion must be tempered with wisdom. Compassion means to do what is best to reduce present and future suffering.

"Middling faculties" here refers to medium maturity, medium capacity, and medium inclination. The "Vehicle of Solitary Realizers" is the teaching of dependent origination. It is a short way of saying: go out and experience the complexity of the process of cause and effect, which is in evidence everywhere. The first step is to understand cause and result in a basic way: "this, therefore that." Those with the lowest level of understanding can appreciate that a negative cause will have a negative result, and a positive cause will have a positive result. But what we often see in everyday experience is not so clear. The next step is to understand that, although there is causality, it is not necessarily linear. There are so many causes and conditions coming together to produce any result, that we may tend to come to doubt the teaching of cause and effect. This happens all the time because individuals, in our narrow view and understanding, cannot see the relationship between the cause and the result. Solitary Realizers pay a great deal of attention to everything in the world, particularly the natural world, where they appreciate the multiplicity of causes and conditions and see that nothing escapes the law of cause and effect. So, the first level of the teaching of karma is cause and result. The second level is the complexity, the multiplicity of causes and conditions that lead to any result.

We may wonder sometimes what happened to the positive result of our wholesome action or the negative result of our unwholesome action, because we do not always experience either one so directly or clearly. What Dolpopa says here is that, once people accept the law of cause and effect, they must also acknowledge the complexity of it. That is the proper teaching for the second level of students. We want karma to be simple and linear, but it is a long and winding road because nothing is independent. It is not "A leads directly to B." The entire alphabet is also mixed in between. Every cause has multiple causes and conditions. No single cause is independent. For example, what was necessary for us to get here today? If we start making a list of the causes, we will never finish the list. Who built the roads and the car we came in? Who made our clothes? What kind of traffic or other situations might have stopped us from coming? Who designed and built this building? Where did all the materials come from? To think that there is a clear and evident connection between cause and result is childish. Dolpopa explains that we must be careful to teach **both** the basic idea of cause and effect and the complexity as well, or practitioners may lose their confidence in the teachings.-

The third level of karma is "extraordinary cause and result," which is the teaching on Buddha Nature. This statement concerns ultimate reality, which is difficult to speak of using the language of conventional reality. Just as in conventional reality there are causes and results, so in ultimate reality, using the unavoidable terms of human language, the cause of our enlightenment is an extraordinary cause. All other causes are caused —and all other causes are also results. In conventional reality there is no first cause; we can always go back a step further. It is an infinite regression. Western scientists speak of the Big Bang and decide to stop there. But what caused the Big Bang? And what caused the cause of the Big Bang? They never go there because it leads to an infinite regression. However, in ultimate reality, the result is non-different from the cause, unlike in conventional reality, where the result is always different from the cause. The ultimate cause of enlightenment is Buddha Nature —already there, complete with all qualities. That is why it is called here "extraordinary cause and result, in the sublime Vehicle." The <u>basis</u> is Buddha Nature, the <u>path</u> is the progressive manifestation of Buddha Nature, and

the result is the full manifestation of Buddha Nature. There is no transformation. That is why Dolpopa called it the path of letting go. There is nothing that needs to be added to Buddha Nature. All our efforts are directed, not at Buddha Nature, but at what covers Buddha Nature. We are removing stuff, not adding or creating or establishing. We are letting go of stuff, and we do it skillfully.

Karma means action, and it never goes away. There is a progression of understanding. Dolpopa says that when we have low capacity, we need the basic teaching. When we understand that negative causes create negative results and positive causes create positive results, then we begin to understand the complexity of karma in conventional reality. After we understand that, we must understand that what applies to conventional reality does not apply to ultimate reality. If we are going to use cause and result as concepts, we must understand that in ultimate reality, the cause is Buddha Nature, the path is Buddha Nature, and the result is Buddha Nature. The fundamental teaching is that, due to an unenlightened view, we identify with the story of the self, which is a sequence of actions, of causes and results. Enlightenment means that we stop identifying with any sequence whatsoever. Once we get out of the whole consciousness of time, then we can understand that we are not going backward or forward —that view is part of ignorance. Time is part of what is not true, unreal, false.

All views are perspectives, constructed; the same thing is true about who we think we are and what we think our causal series is. If two people are looking at each other, who is self and who is other? The answer is completely a matter of perspective. The Buddha talked of action independent of the three spheres: independent of subject, object, and medium. It is caused but there is no one doing it, and there is no one receiving it. What we call an individual is a causal series, a plot, a story. Our view of self and other is just a perspective. The moment we stop identifying and stop saying, “This is my view, life, or story,” and get off the wrong view of separation, it is not that karma disappears, but it is no longer ours. When we go to the movies, we can become very involved with the characters and identify with them, but when the movie is over, and they turn on the lights, we immediately understand that we are not a part of that story on the screen.

We must be very careful. There are levels to every teaching, and here we are talking about the teaching of cause and effect, and even that must be taught in stages. We would not start someone off in their study of Buddhism by telling them that they need not worry about anything since they have Buddha Nature, which manifests spontaneously, and what it manifests into is Buddha Nature. Being told this, we may think we already are Buddhas and do not have to do anything. Without first having the understanding that we must separate from the false identity, we cannot progress. Because it is *our* identification, we must do it, and we must do it ourselves; that is why there are no saviors in Buddhism.

We pray many prayers, but praying is like combing our hair in front of a mirror. It is not the hair on the image that we comb, even though in our perception that is what we see. When we pray, we may be focused on an image, but it is a reflection of us. Prayer is a skillful way to change ourselves. Because we are outward-oriented, we need the mirror. Buddhism skillfully utilizes our current limitations and tendencies so that we can leave them behind. Many people think this is the path **to** freedom, but it is the path **of** freedom. How much we traverse this path frees us to that level. We do not have to wait. When we start observing the Precepts, we do not have to wait for a reward; we are free of liability for transgressing them at that very moment. The moment we stop killing, we are free of the liability for killing. Dharma is always instantaneous. It is the path **of** freedom.

There is a sutra teaching in which the Buddha was asked a question by a king who had killed his own father to usurp the throne and then jailed his mother. He was very much a skeptic and unbeliever, but he asked the Buddha about the benefits of the path. The Buddha did not speak of the future benefits of following the Dharma, but began to list the present benefits, and he listed many, many benefits. We are also that king. Perhaps we do not practice with enthusiasm or effort because we believe the result is not

going to happen right away, and there are more pressing things to do right now. However, when we understand that the benefits of the Dharma are not far away but are right here, then our priorities begin to change. We do not have to wait; when we practice, the freedoms immediately begin to accumulate: freedom from worry, freedom from liability, freedom from desire. How much have we done in our lives, how much effort expended, to get all those things that we wanted? Those who lead a simple life by choice are more content and much freer than those who think they need three of this, and ten of that, and twenty of those. Simplicity does not come through force but from not wanting so much. Preferring simplicity to the enslavement of accumulation is true freedom. When we begin to be free from desire, that is true freedom.

We have in our hands the practical way to be free, and this is literally what this teaching is talking about. When we understand cause and effect at its basic, its more advanced, and the absolute sense of our Buddha Nature, then we can start enjoying the freedom that the path gives us. If we could not do anything about our condition, why study suffering and the causes of suffering? Buddhism asks us to spend time looking at why it hurts because we **can** do something about it. Buddhism is always about suffering and the elimination of suffering —both must be understood. Without understanding the causes of suffering, we cannot know how to eliminate them. Without knowing how to eliminate them, it is not worth our time to study the causes of suffering.

> *Abandon wrongdoing. It can be done. If there were no likelihood, I would not ask you to do it. But since it is possible and brings about blessings and happiness, I do ask you to abandon wrongdoing.*
>
> *Cultivate doing good. It can be done. If it brought deprivation and sorrow, I would not ask you to do it. But since it brings blessings and happiness, I do ask you: Cultivate doing good.*
> —Buddha Shakyamuni

Understanding karma is not understanding the specific interactions of multiple causes and conditions, but understanding the process. What we do now is the cause of our future, and knowing the specifics is unnecessary. Every action produces a consequent result. No act occurs in a vacuum nor remains in a vacuum, but projects forward. Order is not occasional. What we do now is the cause of our future, whether we recognize or not the detailed connections between the multiple causes and conditions that inform it.

The Buddha was once asked, “How do I know my previous life?” He answered that we know it by looking at our present life, and we know how our future life will be by looking at the present life as well. We always know enough. Look at ourselves: what we see is the result of what we did in the past. We do not need to know much more than that. Trying to tease out the specifics is not important. The important principle is that there is a process, a complex causal relationship, and, therefore, we are responsible for our lives. No one is doing this to us and no one can. Yes, others may and frequently do commit unspeakable atrocities within samsara, but our being in samsara is our doing. No one else put us here — no god, no devil, no fate. We own our ignorance. And therefore, we can remedy it. That truth is liberating.

Whatever we do not like in our lives, we can change. Since the quality of the cause and the effect are the same, if we are suffering in a certain way, we must stop doing that to others. If we have a lack of resources in our life, the solution is to give to others. If we are ill all the time, heal others who are ill. Remember, everyone out there is the mirror, and when we groom the one in the mirror, we are grooming ourselves. We can solve all our problems by taking care of the problems of others. This is the Golden Rule: what we do not want done to us, do not do it to others, and what we want others to do for

us, do for others. It works. Does it work immediately or exactly when we want it? No. We have a whole stack of causes and conditions that are going to manifest when conditions are suitable.

> *When we take care of ourselves, we take care of others. When we take care of others, we take care of ourselves. How is it that when we take care of ourselves, we take care of others? It is by ethical training, ethical culture, and ethical development. And how is it that when we take care of others, we take care of ourselves? It is by forbearance, by harmlessness, by goodwill, and compassion*. —Buddha Shakyamuni

We must start by acknowledging the fortune of having this precious human life. The question is, then, "What are we going to do with it?" Are we going to squander our good karma on stylish shoes, fancy phones, and mindless entertainment? We have been given the path **of** freedom, and we can walk it or throw away the opportunity. It is up to us.

TWENTY-ONE

I bow to you who care for the disciples with the Three Wheels in sequence and especially with the Swift Path, just as parents care for infants, adolescents, and young adults according to their development.

We have explained that the Three Wheels of the Dharma are thematic divisions, and Dolpopa has clearly articulated them. The First Wheel is the cycle of the Four Truths: the truths of suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to the cessation of suffering. It is also known as the Wheel of Renunciation because, in our first steps along the path, we need to abandon many things. That is why, when asked to summarize the entire teaching, the Buddha said, "Avoid harm, do good, purify the mind," which is also a summary of the three cycles of the Dharma. The first is renunciation, avoiding harm. If this life has not worked for us up to now, continuing to insist on more of the same is also not going to work. So, the first instruction is to stop doing much of what we are doing.

The first teaching of the Four Truths is that we cannot blame others, an omnipotent god, the devil, the universe, or situations, because that places us in a position of victimhood. We need to take responsibility for our thoughts, our words, our emotions, and our deeds. We must deal with our lives; we cannot just wish for things to be better. If we want our lives to be different, we must do something different. If we want to stop suffering, we must stop putting in place the causes of suffering. In the terse statement of Panchen Vimalamitra, one of the eight teachers of Guru Padmasambhava, "*It only ends when you stop*."

We must stop reacting automatically and creating a series of unwanted consequences. This is the first turning and is very basic. Dolpopa compares teaching this cycle to a parent caring for an infant. It is also called the Wheel of Self-liberation, because most of the benefit of following these instructions is to ourselves. When we harm others, we are giving them a temporary setback, but we are giving ourselves a lasting setback in generating negative karma and the tendency to continue to do harm.

Dolpopa calls the second Dharma cycle the Wheel of No Characteristics. This fundamental teaching is among the most difficult for us to accept, and Dolpopa aptly compares it to a parent caring for an adolescent. As we have already discussed, the characteristics that we perceive and swear belong to people, things, and situations are absolutely coming from us. We impute or project these characteristics based on our tendencies and previous experience. Our likes and dislikes are simply our judgements and our perspectives. Is something far or close? The answer depends on what we are used to. Is this a big or a small city? That depends on our perspective. Two people go to the same party or movie and one person is entertained and the other person is totally bored. All the characteristics that we impute on things and people and situations are ours.

Suffering arises when we reify these imputed characteristics, believing them to be inherent, believing them to come from the side of the person, the thing, or the situation. However, when we begin to understand that it is our own judgement, our own opinion which is creating these characteristics, then we have a choice to change our view. One of the imputed characteristics that causes the most suffering is that someone or something will make us happy. In religious terms, it is that someone or something will save us. That is the most damaging imputation, because it leads to passivity and victimhood. This situation is very sad because we actually have the power to change our lives. We do not meditate for meditation's sake. We do it to help us stop grasping so tightly to our opinions and our perspective. Our opinions will not disappear, but we can stop seeing them as the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

When we have reified our opinions, we go around wondering how everyone else can be mistaken. One of my favorite cartoons is from a popular Argentinian strip, *Mafalda*. One of the characters, Miguelito, is very full of himself. In the first panel of the strip, he is sitting on a curb and saying to himself, "The next car to go by will be red." In the second panel a car goes by, and it is blue. In the final panel, the character says, "How could a car be so wrong?" And that is exactly how we think! We argue with reality all the time. Then we suffer because the world does not do what we want it to do. We argue with the weather and with objects that don't function exactly the way we want them to. If we do not understand that we are imputing characteristics, we are going to suffer.

We also impute negative characteristics as if they were permanent. One of the worst is: "I am not good enough. I am imperfect." These are characteristics that are imputed to us based on certain occurrences or episodes, but episodes do not constitute a self. We impute to ourselves characteristics, but they do not exist. What exists is a series of actions, a process, a story, a plot. When we confuse that plot with a "self", we do not allow ourselves the opportunity to be different, to change. Our "permanent" characteristics do not exist. So, the second cycle of teachings is absolutely necessary to understand, because most of our suffering comes from imputing characteristics. However, we cannot begin to understand the second cycle until we stop agitating our minds by stopping all the negative actions addressed in the first cycle of teachings. The first cycle helps us to remove the trash and then, in the second, we can begin to see what there is and what is not.

However, if we stay there in the Second Wheel of Dharma, we may develop the tendency to believe that, if all characteristics are imputed, nothing is real. This may lead to the belief that it does not matter what we do. Therefore, the Buddha gave us the Third Turning of the Wheel of Dharma, which is the wheel that specifies the essence of reality. Dolpopa calls it the "Dharma Wheel of Certainty in the Absolute," and here compares teaching it to a parent caring for a young adult. There is an absolute, and that is Buddha Nature. It is not all relative; it is not all opinions. Every sentient being has Buddha Nature. More to the point, Buddha Nature has all sentient beings. Every sentient being is an aspect of Buddha Nature. However, one thing is what we are by nature and another thing is what we are manifesting at this moment. We have many children's stories like *The Ugly Duckling* and *The Lion King,* in which the hero is someone wonderful, but for a long time is unaware of that fact. We all have Buddha Nature, but we are probably not manifesting it, and as long as we do not manifest it we suffer, and others suffer.

That is why all three cycles of the Wheel of Dharma are necessary, because Buddha Nature has all of us, but, right now, we are suffering. The Buddha's teaching is practical, and that is why he began with the first truth, the truth of suffering. He did not come to talk about mystical things. There were "fourteen questions" that the Buddha refused to answer because they are not relevant to our actual situation here in samsara (*Is the world eternal, or not, or both, or neither? Is the world finite, or not, or both, or neither? Is the self the same as the body, or is it different from the body? Does the Tathagata exist after death, or not, or both, or neither?*) Speculating about the answers to these questions does not stop our suffering. The Buddha taught us to deal with the reality of our lives right now, and right now, we are suffering. If we think that we are not suffering, then we do not understand what suffering is.

> *The noble life does not depend on the dogma of the eternality of the world, nor does it depend on the dogma of the infinity of the world. Whether the world is eternal or not, and whether the world is finite or not, there is birth and there is death, there are grief, sorrow, pain, lamentation, and despair, and it is for their extinction in this very life that I preach the Dharma.*
> —Buddha Shakyamuni

We suffer with the obvious things, physical and emotional pain, which is called *the suffering of suffering*. No one has ever been free of the suffering of suffering. There is also *the suffering of change* —even that which is a cause of pleasure can become a cause of pain. Try eating a huge bucket of your favorite ice

cream and see what happens. The home that protects and shelters us can become a cause of death in an earthquake or a fire. The other aspect of the suffering of change is that everything we enjoy will end. We cannot keep our pleasure. Even if it does not turn into pain, it will end. Finally, there is also *the suffering of conditioned existence*. If we have been born, we will become ill, we will age, and we will die. Most of us are not lining up for any of those things, but they happen to all of us. Therefore, if any of us thinks that we are not suffering, we have not analyzed our lives. The Buddha began His teaching with suffering because that is our common experience. We do not need to know how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. There are theologians who argued for centuries about whether God could create a mountain so big and heavy that He could not move it. These kinds of inquiries are not helpful.

In this life and in these bodies, suffering cannot be avoided, but the Second Noble Truth explains that it has a cause, and the Third Noble Truth that it can be ended. Both truths are helpful and relevant to our actual situation. We can make new decisions, and we can begin to act in new ways that do not produce suffering. However, we cannot escape the consequences of previous actions. These human bodies that age and become ill and die are the consequence of previous actions, and that karma is already manifesting. When the Buddha teaches that we can end suffering, it means that we will end the cycle of rebirth. Even the Buddha Shakyamuni died.

The Second Noble Truth is that there is a cause of suffering, and we are the agent. That is great news, because if we are responsible, then it is within our power to end it. Would we really want someone else to be responsible for our suffering or for our happiness? Many do not like the Second Noble Truth and would much prefer to blame others or wait for rescue, but personal responsibility for suffering is the key to happiness.

That is why the Buddha can utter the Third Noble Truth, which is that there is an end to suffering. The end is possible because our true essence is Buddha Nature. We say not only that we can be enlightened or that suffering can end, but that both are inevitable. Sooner or later, things can only be what they are. The Buddha said, “Three things cannot be hidden forever: the sun, the moon, and the Truth.” The Truth is Buddha Nature, and it cannot be covered forever, just like the clouds cannot cover the sun forever. Enlightenment is inevitable; the only question really is, how long do you want it to take?

The Fourth Noble Truth tells us that there is a path, a method to the cessation of suffering. That method is available to everyone; it is not a method that is only for those in the “Buddhist club.” My Lama used to say, “No secrets, no sides.” Secrets and sides go together: the idea that someone has the only truth and only if you are a part of the group will they share it with you. The Buddha never asked any of the thousands of people who came to see him to sign up and pledge their loyalty to him. He shared his teachings openly. There are no secrets. However, some things we do not share too openly, but not because they are secret. We hold them for the same reason we do not give a toddler a fork to stick in a light socket. The hearer must have the capacity to deal with the teaching.

In text 21, Dolpopa tells us that it is necessary to give these teachings in sequence, and especially with the Swift Path. Buddhism is divided into two great schools, the Hinayana or self-liberation school, and the Mahayana or the universal liberation school. Within each large school there are other schools. There are many schools in the Mahayana, and one is the Vajrayana or the Swift Path (*vajra* can mean indestructible, diamond, or lightning bolt). It is the Swift Path because we make the bold claim that you can manifest enlightenment in this body and in this lifetime. The usual Mahayana timetable is that it takes three interminable eons to cultivate the merit and the wisdom to become enlightened. That is a very long time, and it is unnecessary. There are some people who take forever to wake up in the morning. They keep hitting the snooze button on the alarm clock. Others wake up right away. We want to take the Swift Path. We can take that path because we have Buddha Nature; it is right here. It is the closest thing to us. It is the essence of what we are; we just need to wake up.

Part of waking up is that we can make new decisions and act in ways that do not produce suffering. A great deal of our suffering is a conscious act, and we can eliminate much of it by having control of our minds. The Buddha said that when there is the suffering of suffering, when the body is ill or aging or about to die for example, it is like the body being shot with one arrow. But the Buddha spoke also of a second arrow. Most people, on top of the first arrow, are adding a second, more painful arrow of aversion and regret. The second arrow is completely avoidable. This body is aging, is ill, is dying, but on top of that we regret it and become anxious about it. When something is happening already, fretting about it is just an added layer of suffering. Through the Dharma, we learn to eliminate the fretting, the second and most painful arrow, so at the very least, suffering will be reduced by half, or more than half.

We have decided that everything that we don't like should end, and all that we like should not end. This is fighting with reality. Once we accept that all things end and stop identifying, our pain is greatly reduced. We are not this body; we are not this mind. Let us stop claiming identity with suffering, such as, "I am angry, or I am sad." Instead, let us think, "There is anger; there is sadness; there is disease; there is death." Our language, our self-talk, is very powerful. We also exaggerate constantly. "I am dying here!" We all say such things that are a mind-trip and create a great deal of suffering. If we are hungry, instead of saying that we are starving, try simply saying, "There is hunger." The experience will be very different. Even pain is largely mental. Those who are in pain can forget the pain when they are distracted from it. We have all experienced this and observed this in our children and others. Of course, there is pain, and it has a physical cause, but the more we place our mind there, the more we will experience it. Pain is the physical discomfort, and suffering is the inability to cope with it, the second arrow.

Dolpopa calls the third cycle the Wheel of Certainty in the Absolute because, when we have certainty in our Buddha Nature, our suffering is greatly reduced. In our ordinary lives, for example, we feel better simply by going to the doctor and receiving a diagnosis. Even before a course of medication or treatment is administered, we feel better because we have some confidence in the doctor. Our fear comes from not-knowing, and that is why ignorance is our greatest enemy. That is why we pray for the union of wisdom and compassion. Wisdom is necessary to stop our own fear and suffering, and compassion is necessary to help others with their fear and suffering.

As long as others are suffering, we will suffer. There is no escaping the fact that separation is a wrong view. It is false. It is not wrong in the moral sense; it is just untrue. It is ignorance in the sense of not seeing things as they are. It is like thinking that only the lowest part of the Titanic is sinking, but the part where we are, still high up above the water, is not sinking. As long as some people are sinking, we are all sinking. That is why we need the union of wisdom and compassion. Without compassion, wisdom can be cruel. Without wisdom, compassion can be foolish. Ignorance is the basis, and limitation is the expression. When we do not think that we are capable, then we manifest limitations. But what the Buddhas have, we have as well.

TWENTY-TWO

I bow to the Lamas who also teach the Three Wheels in sequence, and especially the Swift Path, according to the character of disciples, like assigning work to an inferior, middling, or superior child, according to character.

It is important to recognize that those of us who grew up in the West always want the latest, the highest, the best. We are trained by marketing to always go for the top. We want the new and improved, and never want to start at the beginning. Even at work, people do not want to start at an entry level. I remember being in a monastery years ago, and a young man had just joined. At mealtimes, it is traditional etiquette to serve the monks according to seniority. The older monks sat in front and got their food first. This young man in the back row asked me, pointing at the senior monks, "When can I sit up there?" I solemnly answered, "When all of them are dead."

Even in the Dharma, we want to be at the head, and this tendency manifests very much in wanting higher teachings. People do not want to hear about the basic stuff. They want the so-called highest or "secret" teachings. Here Dolpopa, in the 13th century, says that the teachers who cater to that demand are not doing anyone a favor. He bows to those who "teach the Three Wheels in sequence." These teachings were not given by the Buddha chronologically, but according to the audience to which He was speaking. All these cycles of teachings were given more or less at the same time. It is not that the Buddha only thought of the higher teachings at the end of his life. What made the difference was the character of the audience. Here Dolpopa is speaking of character; not maturity, or ability, or inclination. Wanting only the top, most advanced teachings is a character flaw; thinking that one is beyond the basic teachings is a big problem. It says, "I am too good for the basics! I am not going to be just like everyone. I am going to be at the top! I will sit in the front row! I want to be served first!"

The Three Wheels are divided by topic, and the first turning of the wheel includes the basics of the Four Noble Truths, of karma, and of Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. These are the basics of the path. The first cycle is also the wheel of avoiding harm and is sometimes called the Wheel of Renunciation. The first thing we must do when we start out on the path is give up a lot of unwholesome stuff, all of which is causing suffering, agitation, and confusion. Many people are afraid of giving up things, but the only thing we give up is dependence on externals which falsely and very briefly make us happy. Unless we give up falsehood and illusion about ourselves, the world, and others, we will never make progress. If we are expecting things to be other than what they are, we are going to be hitting the proverbial wall, always thinking, "If only things were different." If we keep changing what is into what is not, and predicate our expectations on what is not, we are just being foolish.

That very first cycle of Dharma is what people do not want to do because there is a component called Right Effort. Effort is essential because our momentum is not unlike that of those enormous super tankers full of oil. Someone decided to calculate what would happen if they could not stop one of them heading towards the port of San Juan in Puerto Rico. They discovered that one of those tankers would have so much momentum that it would go inland halfway through the country, that is, fifteen miles into a thirty-mile-wide island. That is how much momentum one of those huge tankers has, and it takes a lot of energy and effort to slow it down or turn it. We have more momentum than one of those tankers. We have innumerable lifetimes of accumulated habits, and it takes a great deal of effort to change the long-established direction. However, the Buddha said, "Avoid harm. If it were not possible, I would not ask it of you." It is not impossible, but it takes tremendous effort because we are already on a different path; we have this other momentum. Not only do we have it, but we have a whole cheering section in society pushing us to continue the harming and self-cherishing. Therefore, many do not want to hear about the

first cycle of the Wheel of Dharma, and that is a character flaw: “I am too good for the basics.” It has nothing to do with capacity or understanding.

There was a Chinese minister of the Imperial Court who became interested in Buddhism late in life. He decided to use his post to visit the oldest, greatest, and wisest Buddhist monks in every area where his duties took him. Finally, he found the oldest, wisest monk in all of China. He went and asked this monk to give him the very highest Buddhist teaching, and the old monk said, “Avoid harm; do good; purify the mind.” The minister was outraged and angrily replied that every three-year-old in China knew that teaching. The wise old monk replied, “Yes, very young children know it, but old imperial ministers do not practice it.” If we are not even practicing the basics, why are we interested in learning more? Would we apply to go for a doctorate in astrophysics if we could not distinguish a moon from a planet?

The first thing that we must do is be humble, acknowledge our suffering, and accept that we need to start at the beginning. This beginning is not something that we ever get away from. In the Japanese Zen tradition, they repeat often that one should keep a “beginner’s mind.” What they mean by this is to never think that we have outgrown the need for the basics. When I was doing the *ngondro*, the foundation practices of the Vajrayana, my Lama told me not to count the refuges, prostrations, mandala offerings, or purification mantras, because they are not something to be completed and left behind. In Buddhism, there is no such thing as “Been there, done that.” We do not “get over” certain teachings. Do we get overeating, sleeping, drinking water, or breathing? We never get over being a beginner. We must always pay attention, and if we stop paying attention to the fundamental teachings, then we have sabotaged our own cultivation.

Dolpopa does not stop there. He says, “And especially the Swift Path,” which is the Vajrayana. There is a hierarchy of teachings, but it is not a hierarchy of importance. If we are building a three-story house, we do not demolish the first story to build the next two. We must make sure that the first story is strong enough to carry the second and the third. There were teachers, even in Dolpopa’s time, who did not pay much attention to the basic teachings. They even claimed that such teachings were not definitive. ALL the teachings of the Buddha are definitive. What changes is the character, the capacity, the intention, the inclination, and the maturity of the student. Without the basic teachings, we cannot move forward.

There is a reason why the First Precept is first. The First Precept is to abstain from depriving others of their lives, directly or indirectly. It goes further and says not to condone killing when done by others and not to rejoice in it. It is the First Precept because, if we do not follow it, there is no point in observing the other four. Once we have killed or allowed a sentient being to be killed, does it matter if we lie to that being, or steal from him or her? Things are given in an order because they are necessary. The first cycle of the Wheel of Dharma is to renounce harm to ourselves and others. Those who reject it or believe they are above it manifest a character flaw.

The second cycle of the Wheel of Dharma is the Wheel of No Characteristics. It is the one in which the Buddha explained emptiness or how our perceptions make us take appearances as reality. The Wheel of No Characteristics simply means that all the qualities that we project on to people, things, and events come from us. There is no such thing as an inherent characteristic or quality. The third cycle of the Wheel of Dharma is the Wheel of Buddha Nature. Once we understand that appearances are appearances and not realities, we may come to the unfortunate reasoning that if nothing is real, then there is no real harm in anything we do. So, the Buddha, particularly to those who understood the second cycle, taught that there is reality, there is Truth, there is True Purity, True Being, True Bliss, and True Permanence. Reality is not what we think it is; it is not appearances, but it is real.

The teaching must be tailored to the character of the disciples, “Like assigning work to an inferior, middling, or superior child.” There is an inferior student—one who is not ready. It is unfair to that

student to give him or her something too advanced. It is not withholding; it is taking care. If we gave more than what is appropriate, we would do a disservice to that student. Dolpopa twice mentions character in this text because it is so important. A person may have great capacity and great understanding and great desire to hear the higher teachings, but the Lama to whom Dolpopa will bow is the one who will not teach what is beyond the character of a student. This is not withholding a secret. It must be done, because jumping ahead can lead to error. We cannot manage that which our character flaws may distort.

Character means having the right intention. Character can grow and change, but it changes by accepting our current situation and by applying the teachings that are appropriate for that situation. There are people who listen to basic teachings over and over and do not apply them. If we are not practicing avoiding harm, why are we asking for a higher teaching? Sometimes the basics are as much as a student needs. People do get lost. It is not that the higher teachings are dangerous or can be used against others in evil ways, but we can hurt ourselves by going deeper into samsara, into the cycle of birth, disease, aging, and death. We may think we are getting out, but we are getting further in. People who misjudge their own development are harming themselves, and, sadly, many of them end up misleading others. That is the biggest danger of all. If we are driving and become lost and are given directions by someone who does not know the way, that person has led us further astray. Being lost is one problem, but getting others lost is a bigger problem. In our lineage, the authorization to teach is specific. If we have not received the teaching and the specific authorization to teach it, we cannot impart it.

Dolpopa begins with character and comes back to it at the end of the text because the Dharma is a means to train the mind, and the greatest obstacle to training the mind is to have illusions about the self. If I think I am Napoleon, would anyone be doing me a favor by giving me an army? A true teacher is always concerned that the teaching not be distorted and turned against the disciple. It is very easy to misunderstand even when using the same language. We never know what people are going to understand, and if we do not know the audience at all, there can be great misunderstanding. Even the most basic teachings can be manipulated and misunderstood or watered down. For example, many teachers today say the Precepts are optional, or they do not mention them at all. Some “teachers” on the internet and elsewhere, for example, recommend against the need for a teacher at all. There is a great Indian saying, “He who has himself for a teacher has a fool for a disciple.” Buddhism is offered, never forced, and to accept it is voluntary. That does not mean that the Dharma is a buffet or a food court. It means that we accept it or do not accept it. It should not be deconstructed, picked over, watered down. We must either take it fully as it is, or we are free to reject it.

If we could force anyone to become a Buddhist, that would not do any good whatsoever. The main idea of Buddhism is that we take responsibility for our thoughts, words, and deeds. If someone forces us to do that, we are not really taking responsibility.

> *Every form of independence is happiness. Every form of dependence on others is suffering. There is no greater joy than becoming independent and then endeavoring for good qualities.* —Jamgon Mipham

Everything is voluntary, but that does not mean that everything can be tailor-made. There is a certain sequence. It is not the six-fold or two-fold noble path; it is the Eightfold Noble Path. There are not two or three noble truths, but Four Noble Truths. There are Five Precepts, not two or three. There are not *some* foundational Bodhisattva vows; there are four. (We do allow people to take Precepts one at a time, but that is not to infer that the others are permanently optional. We take one precept with the idea that this is as much as we can handle now, and that step will help us to be ready to accept another.)

The First Wheel of Dharma is the most basic and perhaps the most important. The main teaching of that first wheel is "Stop." There was a serial killer in the time of the Buddha, who wore the thumbs of his 999 victims as a garland around his neck. He ran after the Buddha to kill him and could not reach him. Eventually, he became exhausted and yelled out to the Buddha to stop. The Buddha turned and said, "I have stopped. You have not stopped." That is the teaching of the first Wheel of Dharma, "Stop!" We may not be serial killers, but if we are still suffering, and we all are, whatever it is that we are doing to cause our own and others' suffering, we must STOP. That is a great teaching. We could say that the three cycles of Dharma are: Stop, Go, Arrive. We need these things in the right order. We cannot go in the right direction before we stop going in the wrong direction, and we cannot get there if we do not begin to go in the right direction.

Many statements by the great teachers may have been phrased in ways that are not accessible to us because we are separated from them by place, time, culture, circumstance, language, maturity, understanding, etc. But they are not esoteric, or mysterious, or particularly difficult. If there is one thing that I aim to do, it is to demystify these teachings. They were not mystical when they were given. The Buddha said that a secret teaching is the sign of false doctrine. It was never meant to be secret; it is just that we do not understand it, so it may be a secret to us. Enlightenment is not strange, or even difficult. What is difficult is to keep suffering. Enlightenment is easy; it is blissful. It is a question of degree and depth and realization, not of a particular understanding or knowledge. The Buddha said that practicing faithfully any one of the innumerable teachings that He gave is enough for enlightenment.

One of the Buddha's main disciples had a brother who also wanted to join the monastic order, but he had significant intellectual limitations. The Buddha welcomed him and encouraged him, but this man could not remember anything, even the simplest instruction, so learning the Dharma was impossible for him. Eventually, the Buddha gave the man a broom to sweep the courtyard where the Sangha was meeting. The Buddha told him to just remember that, as he swept the courtyard, he was purifying his mind. It is recorded in the sutras that this man, by following that instruction alone, was one of the first fully enlightened disciples of the Buddha.

Therefore, whatever practice we do, if we do it fully, it will be a path to our enlightenment. Enlightenment is our natural state —a state without incidental stains, wrong views, and afflicted emotions. It is being at peace. This disciple was shown the practice that he could do, and he did it well and consistently. Remember, there are no *enlightened beings*; there is *being enlightened*. If we act without attachment, aversion, and indifference, that is an enlightened act. If we string enough of those together, we are enlightened. We have all had enlightened moments, many of them. Just keep having them. We will not sprout a third eye or become something preternatural. Enlightenment is about being real in the strictest sense, without illusion and without wanting reality to be other than it is.

TWENTY-THREE

I bow to the Lamas who teach that the Buddha Dharma of the Three Wheels in sequence, and especially of the Swift Path, is to be approached in succession, like climbing to the top of a three-story mansion.

There are individuals, even lineages, that conceive of the "higher" teachings as separate from the "lower" ones. However, it is the understanding of the Jonang that the teachings build on each other, and that the so-called lower teachings are not inferior, but rather fundamental, in the sense of being underpinnings. Therefore, we do not abandon any of the "lower" teachings as we advance, but make sure to practice them. Anytime we do something, we need to do it from the beginning. If we are going to pilot an airplane, for example, we must go through the entire security checklist from the beginning. Every time we drive somewhere, no matter how many times we have gone there before, we must follow all the directions, not just the last few turns. Every time we cook a recipe, we must go through all the steps. Without a foundation, there can be no progress, and the foundation needs to stay firmly in place. The rest of the building is built on top of that foundation.

Dolpopa uses the metaphor of a three-story mansion, and it is brilliant. If you want to go to the third story of a three-story building, can you bypass the first and second floors? Even if you do not spend time on the first or second floors, you cannot do away with them. You must pass through them every time you go to the third floor. If you do away with them, the third floor collapses. There is no avoiding the first or the second floors. The teachings of the Buddha are organized in three cycles. The first cycle is the cycle of the Four Noble Truths, fundamentally about karma and renunciation; the second cycle is the cycle of emptiness or No Characteristics, and the third cycle is the cycle of Buddha Nature or absolute reality.

We cannot reach any of the so-called higher teachings without the foundation. There is a great danger that we will misunderstand and misapply the advanced teachings if they are not based on the understanding and the practice of the basic ones. We always go back to the basics. We have mentioned the Zen Buddhist idea that we need to maintain a beginner's mind. That means to not forget the basics. Without the basics, there is no going forward. Dolpopa emphasized this point because, even in the 14th century when he was writing this, it was already becoming apparent that there were Buddhist practitioners who were disdaining the basics.

By noting that disdain, Dolpopa points out something that is still with us today. That is the idea that if you have an understanding and view that you believe to be "higher," you do not need to observe the basic Precepts. Sadly, if you look around the Buddhist world today, that is what is going on: Buddhism without karma, without rebirth, without Precepts. It is a free-for-all. The fundamentals have become optional. In our lineage, we speak of the Dharma of Definitive Meaning, and what we mean is that all the Dharma is definitive, and it all needs to be practiced. Parts of it cannot be relegated to the status of a primitive curiosity. Just because we have mastered how to take a shower, that does not mean we now will stop doing it.

The three floors of the Dharma building are parts of the same whole, and our approach has always been that we live on all three floors. There may be a time at the beginning when we are only living on the first floor, but eventually we come to a point in our practice when we are living on all floors at once. A person who walks into a Buddhist teaching for the first time can be very new or very old to the Dharma, depending on this and previous lifetimes. There are some who take to the Dharma very rapidly, so we cannot make the determination of how long each person stays on the first and second floors. That is why we share the whole Dharma, but with a clear understanding that there are no lower teachings. The

Precepts and the Vows are for those on the first, the second, and the third floors. There is no being above the Precepts.

Dolpopa warns us here that Buddhism is training, controlling, and transforming the mind so that we can recognize wrong views and the arising of afflicted emotions. If it is not our intent to do that, it does not matter what we call ourselves or what we claim to practice. If we cannot recognize our own self-grasping and self-cherishing or cannot see in our own minds and hearts the arising of attachment for the pleasant, aversion for the unpleasant, and indifference for the rest, we are not practicing the Dharma. Nirvana means "blowing out," as in extinguishing a candle. What we are blowing out are the fires of attachment, aversion, and indifference. That was the content of the Buddha's Fire Sermon: nirvana means the extinction of attachment, aversion, and indifference. However, those three afflicted emotions behave like trick birthday candles. We blow them out, and they light up again. So, we must exert continuous effort to blow them out for good.

Because we have these bodies and these minds, the trick candles will light up again. We have millennia of habitual tendencies. Even if we do not accept rebirth, are we not the product of millennia of habitual tendencies of our families, our cultures, our countries? Whether we accept it as our own mental continuum or that of the planet, we have millennia of habitual tendencies toward attachment, aversion, and indifference. We are still going at it. Early this morning as I write this, a person in the grip of extreme aversion walked into a nightclub in Florida and killed fifty people because he did not like their lifestyle. We must extinguish those afflictions, and all the teachings are directed to help us with that. If they are not helping us with that, what do we need them for? I have heard some people bragging about how many "higher teachings" and empowerments they have received, but they are not practicing any of them. That is a waste of time. If we receive a teaching that we think is valuable, we must practice it. If we do not think it is valuable enough to practice it, we should not accept it.

Our job is to eradicate wrong views and afflicted emotions in ourselves. That effort is not selfish, because we are contributing to this entire environment of conflict with our own participation in it. When we stop that participation, everything and everyone around us is positively affected. It is so important that we never fall into any camp. That is why Dolpopa said, "At Jonang we take no sides, especially not our own side." We all have a view or a perspective, that is unavoidable, but taking sides means shutting down our ability to understand other viewpoints. It means maintaining a side rather than a principle. "My country, right or wrong," my family, race, culture, gender, religion, species above others —these are all expressions of taking sides. If we start thinking that we are special and hold the only truth, we are one step away from becoming tyrants.

The term Hinayana (Inferior or Narrow Vehicle) is understood today to be pejorative, and we abstain from its use. However, among the Jonang, it was never directed at the Theravada school, but to those who pursue the Dharma for their own selfish purposes. Jetsun Taranatha said that the distinction between Hinayana and Mahayana (Great Vehicle) depends on one's intention.

> *Individuals who cultivate in their mind-stream aspirations and practice for universal enlightenment are followers of the Mahayana. Individuals who cultivate in their mind-stream aspirations and practice for personal liberation are followers of the Hinayana. If they do not cultivate any aspiration or practice, then whatever scriptures they read or schools they claim to follow, they are neither Mahayana nor Hinayana.*
> —Jetsun Taranatha

If we practice for the benefit of all sentient beings, we are practicing the Mahayana, no matter what lineage we follow. If we are practicing only for our own selfish purposes (fame, gain, power, individual liberation), we are practicing the Hinayana, no matter what our lineage. It is not about what scriptural

canon we follow, or what our practices are, or who our teachers are. It is not about the color of our robes. It is all about our intention. Do we have the four infinite thoughts of equanimity, love, compassion, and rejoicing in the happiness of others? If we have that, we are practicing the Mahayana.

> *By composing their minds in equanimity, they see things correctly and exactly as they are. By seeing things correctly and exactly as they are, the Bodhisattvas embrace all sentient beings with compassion.* —Buddha Shakyamuni

In all his writing, Dolpopa is careful to use the terminology of other Buddhist lineages and to point out that the many different terms used in different lineages mean the same thing or point to the same idea. That is one method to avoid thinking that only we have the truth. We must keep an open mind. We will follow our own way, but that is very different from going through the world and proclaiming that our way is the only way. We are free to believe that we are right, but that does not give us the right to assume all others are wrong, and certainly not to subjugate others. We betray our correctness when we seek to impose our views by force or coercion. The goal of a Bodhisattva is to make all beings free from suffering and the causes of suffering. But we will never free someone from suffering and the causes of suffering at gunpoint. It is impossible. It does not work.

Dolpopa speaks here of the Swift Path because some who claim to practice the Vajrayana claim freedom from the Precepts and the basic teachings. There are some Tibetan Lamas today that say that when you kill and eat an animal, you are helping that animal make progress. If that were true, then maybe they should offer themselves to be eaten by others who are more advanced. Padmasambhava said in the 8th century, "*Although your view may be as high as the sky, your conduct must be as fine as ground flour*." What he means is that we can have the highest view or understanding in the world, but we must follow the most basic precepts. The Swift Path does not allow us to jump over the Precepts or the foundational teachings. That is not why it is called swift. It is swift because it recognizes that we do not have to spend interminable eons cultivating Buddha Nature. Buddha Nature is already here.

There are not that many basic precepts: do not kill, steal, deceive, abuse the bodies of others, or become intoxicated to the point that you kill, steal, deceive, or abuse the bodies of others. We apply these Precepts in our behavior, not just towards other humans, but towards all sentient beings. They are not extreme or difficult. If not eating meat is a struggle, begin by giving up meat one day of the week or one week of the month, for example. The way to proceed is by harm reduction. In the US, because of the vegan movement, by some estimations, four-hundred million fewer animals were killed last year. The dairy industry is worried because of a marked increase in the sale of plant-based milks. We must encourage harm reduction, and always maintain our compassion. Remember that we cannot stand up for animals while hating humans. We are all animals, and we are all suffering. Just because someone is doing something that we do not agree with does not mean that we can exclude them from our compassion.

We need to look objectively at things and understand that we have been fed this fiction of human supremacy. Once we buy into that idea, it is a very short trip to claiming that only our particular group is fully human. When we wanted to enslave Africans or exterminate Native Americans, we simply said they were not really human; they were "savage animals." All these horrible names we have assigned throughout history to certain "other" groups of people are an attempt to make them seem less human. And, of course, we humans generally believe that if some beings are not human, we have every right to abuse and exterminate them.

We must acknowledge that all sentient beings are here for their own purposes. The idea that we are the apex, and all other beings are here to serve us, is an extreme wrong view. We have a very inflated sense of our importance. Look at the results of that view. We are destroying the planet because we think we

own the minerals, the gas, the coal, the trees, the space, the water, the animals. Who says that our so-called needs are that important? Who has determined that everything in the universe is for us to exploit for our benefit? We are just one group, one species. Look at us—what do we do? What other animals send armies across the world to kill others of their own kind? No animal in the history of this planet has been as destructive of its own environment as humans, and yet, we think that we are superior.

The *Handbook* is not a text that belongs in the 14th century. It is a text for today. What is our practice? What are we doing? Is Buddhism a hobby, an intellectual pursuit, or is it a practice? If it is a practice, then practice is about real things. We need a foundation for our practice, which is an understanding of suffering, the causes of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to the cessation of suffering. That path is not to be abridged, manipulated, or misrepresented. The path includes Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. What Dolpopa is very clearly pointing to is that the path is not just the so-called higher factors. Unfortunately, there are many New Age Buddhists who only focus on mindfulness. We are in the midst of the McMindfulness spin-cycle. The Buddha said:

> *One is mindful to abandon wrong view and to enter and remain in Right View. One is mindful to abandon wrong intention and to enter and remain in Right Intention. One is mindful to abandon wrong speech and to enter and remain in Right Speech.*
>
> *One is mindful to abandon wrong conduct and to enter and remain in Right Conduct. One is mindful to abandon wrong livelihood and to enter and remain in Right Livelihood.* ***This is Right Mindfulness****.*

That is also what Dolpopa says here. He says not to jump over the basics. If we think we are already good at mindfulness and do not have to consider the steps of the path upon which that is based, our mindfulness is not Right Mindfulness, and will degenerate into delusion.

The problem with karma is that once we perform a negative act, we create a tendency to repeat it. The solution is that we can use it to our advantage. When we perform a virtuous act, we create the tendency to repeat it, and instead of a vicious cycle, we generate a virtuous cycle. The ability to purify our actions is an aspect that is present in us and is part of our own Buddha Nature. It has been there all along. Think about it: How many things have we already purified in our lives? How many things that we did at some point, are we no longer doing? We can step away from judging ourselves and thinking we are bad.

We have a prayer that asks Vajrasattva, the Buddha of Purification, to love us "unreservedly," regardless of our faults and shortcomings. We all have aspects that are nice and not so nice, but we can love all of them, unreservedly. The prayer continues, "Grant me all attainments, purify my actions, and make my mind auspicious." It is not someone else who is going to do this, but an aspect of ourselves that has been there all along. If that aspect were not already there, we would not have been able to get out of any problem that we have ever had. This prayer is calling our best mental continuum into action. Our higher mental continuum is that aspect of us that has a higher view. It is not something unreachable floating above us. But that higher view, like Padmasambhava said, must be paired with conduct "as fine as ground flour."

We must act on principle and accept the foundational teachings, which are mostly about karma. The ultimate meaning of the teachings on karma is accepting responsibility. If I had to explain the whole first cycle of the Wheel of Dharma with one word, it would be "responsibility." Yet, we are all busy blaming others for everything, thinking somebody made us do it, or the circumstances made us do it. Let's not shrug our shoulders and say, "That's how we roll." Well, roll another way! And, little-by-little, we can make great, significant changes.

TWENTY-FOUR

I bow to the Lamas who teach the cleansing of the Buddha Essence by the Three Wheels in sequence and especially by the Swift Path, just as three layers of stain on a precious stone are cleansed in succession by a jeweler.

It is a distinguishing characteristic of the Jonang to do everything methodically. When that is not done, we tend to miss some things, and going back is more difficult than doing things in the right order from the beginning. If we missed something important, even if we go back, we may have made it more difficult. Doing things in order is very important. For example, in our meditation, first we settle the body and then the breath. Next, we settle the mind very systematically. If we do not begin by settling the body with the right posture, we cannot establish the proper breath and mental focus. It is wasted effort to try to accomplish something for which we have not prepared, or that is beyond our current ability. It is a source of frustration. Unfortunately, we see this a great deal in cultivation. People take on practices that are beyond the scope of their capacity, and they eventually come to the erroneous conclusion that the Path does not work. If we have not cultivated Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, and Right Effort, we should not expect Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration to arise. Doing things in an orderly way is essential.

> *Like ascending the steps of a staircase, you should train step-by-step and endeavor in my profound teachings. Without jumping any steps, proceed gradually to the end.*
>
> *Just as small children gradually develop their body and strength, so does our Dharma practice, from the first steps of entering, until the complete perfection.*
> —Buddha Shakyamuni, Nirvana Sutra

However, we also recognize that people are different. What takes a longer time for one may take seconds for another. We all need to follow whatever method and process is key for us. Dolpopa says that he reveres the Lamas who teach the need to approach the manifestation of Buddha Nature, what he calls “the cleansing of the Buddha Essence,” by the Three Wheels in sequence. As we have mentioned, many people during Dolpopa’s time had the erroneous belief that, if we are following the Vajrayana, “the Swift Path,” we can ignore the practices of the foundational teachings and the Bodhisattva path. They thought we could bypass renunciation, bypass the Precepts, and bypass the cultivation of the Perfections. That is why Dolpopa specifically includes the phrase here, “especially by the Swift Path.”

To illustrate the need for this careful sequence, Dolpopa gives us an example of a jewel and how the layers of stain are cleaned by a jeweler. The traditional approach to polishing a gem was done with three types of cloth. In antiquity, precious stones became even more precious because of the work that it took to make them look perfectly polished. The process began with rubbing a very rough cloth to eliminate the rough accretions over the stone. Then a less rough cloth was used, and the stone was rubbed until the next layer was removed. Finally, a very fine cloth was used to give the stone the polish and brilliance that humans have always valued. As do most primates, we have always liked shiny things.

We also have this tendency to want things to happen instantly, and that also is part of our nature. A Lama must resist the temptation to give people what they want. We see this in many other spheres of life as well. For example, because of direct advertising to patients about pharmaceuticals, today patients go to the doctor “knowing” what they need and demand certain prescriptions. A similar attitude has existed for a long time. As we discussed in the previous text, people are demanding the “highest teachings” and want to bypass the fundamentals. They want to go to the rooftop without entering the first, second, or third floors of the building. Dolpopa uses the metaphor of the jeweler because it illustrates that polishing is a methodical, laborious, and repetitive process. It is not something that you

do once and think, “Okay, I did that, so what’s next?” Sadly, however, that attitude is very typical. Unfortunately, you do not become good at anything by doing it just a few times.

To this day, I remember many things that my Lama told me, which I thought I understood at the time, but only now realize the deeper aspects of what he was saying. That happens because there are layers of stains on our Buddha Nature, and it is by repeatedly and laboriously polishing it with the correct cloth that it begins to shine through more brightly. We could take the very rough jewel and use the softest cloth, but we would be rubbing forever. Eventually we will just get a shredded cloth. So not only is there a process to be followed, but we need the proper instrument to deal with the level of obscuration that is present. When we have gross obscurations, we need to apply the rough cloth of the first cycle of the Wheel of Dharma. When our obscurations are finer, we need the medium cloth of the second turning of the Wheel of Dharma. Finally, when we are eliminating the subtle obscurations, we need the very soft but very effective cloth of the third cycle of the Wheel of Dharma.

The beauty of the Swift Path is that we can do a little bit of each type of removal all the time. We do not have to wait three interminable eons. The Swift Path is a condensation of the three interminable eons, but it is not a circumvention. We work with the gross, the medium, and the subtle stains. We work with the two problems of wrong views and afflicted emotions all the time, steadily and by applying the right method.

The grossest problems that we have are the afflicted emotions and actions that come from them. What is the rough cloth that removes that? It is the teachings on karma, accepting responsibility. From the point of view of practice, it is renouncing, not things, but our attachment, aversion, and indifference to them. We can have thousands of things and not be attached to them, and that is not a problem. (I don’t recommend it because it is a nuisance.) We could have just one thing and be totally attached, and then we have a problem. We could have thousands of people who think we are the enemy and not feel any aversion towards them, and that is not a problem. On the other hand, we could focus our animosity on just one person, and that is a big problem.

Therefore, the problem is not the number of things or people for which we feel attachment or aversion. The problem is the afflicted emotion itself. I have said that the essentials of the First Wheel include the understanding and the acceptance of responsibility (the law of karma) and the renunciation of at least the grossest forms of attachment, aversion, and indifference. The Precepts, then, are what make that cloth rough. If we do not know how to eliminate attachment, aversion, and indifference, the Precepts will aid us. The Buddhas do not need for us to practice the Precepts. We are not pleasing anyone by doing so; we are helping ourselves.

We also need to understand karma and the powerful force of habit. All of us have strong tendencies established through previous actions, and first we must realize them. Awareness is the first step in the progression. For example, some people are totally surprised to hear that they are coming across as angry and do not even realize they are raising their voice. We could be feeling aversion and not even notice it, or think it is totally right and justified. We could be in the grip of an extremely strong attachment like addiction and be in complete denial. Those states of mind are different from feeling some level of aversion or attachment, seeing it, knowing it is there, and understanding that it is not beneficial. Noticing the arising of these emotions and recognizing them as problematic is great progress.

Many might become frustrated, wondering why, after hearing the Dharma, we still feel attachment, aversion, and indifference. But we do so because that train is going on an old, established track. We need to build a different set of tracks, or the train will keep going in that old direction. When we notice our afflicted emotions, then we have a chance to put the brakes on. When we first recognize the arising

of afflicted emotions, the best thing is to do nothing. The teaching is, “to become like wood or stone.” That means that we do not act on the emotion.

The next step is to counteract it by applying an antidote. The antidote to attachment is love. Attachment is the desire to be made happy by someone or something. Love is the desire to make everyone happy. The two are very different. Therefore, we counteract attachment by thinking of the well-being of others. For example, if we are attached to buying a lot of stuff, and we recognize that attachment, we could think of the well-being of others: “Are there people who need the basics right now? Can I use my resources in a different way that would benefit others?” When we begin to think that way, our desire for the latest gadget or the fancy clothes will diminish.

The antidote to aversion is compassion. That means to understand that this person to whom we are averse is suffering. For example, the case of a mass murderer is a situation in which it is very easy to feel strong aversion. But we could ask ourselves, “Does a happy person do such a thing? How much suffering must a person be feeling to do something like that?” We can come to understand that people who are content do not do such things. That type of mass murder is a very destructive form of suicide. Through this type of understanding, we can generate compassion, and it will be an antidote to our feelings of aversion.

The afflicted emotion of indifference is problematic because most of the time we do not notice our indifference. Nonetheless, if we reduce our aversion and attachment, indifference is automatically reduced. That is because indifference is the result of paying so much attention to our attachments and aversions that we have no mental space for anything else. Indifference is the closest emotional obscuration to pure ignorance. Ignorance is a conceptual obscuration, not an emotional one, but indifference is very close to it.

So, the third step after noticing afflicted emotions and then applying the correct antidote, is to simply watch the arising of these afflicted emotions. The example often used in the teachings is that of watching a coiled snake. Who can or would want to disentangle a coiled snake? It seems very difficult, but the snake will uncoil herself if you leave her alone and just watch her. So, this level is much easier. When those emotions arise, we look at them and allow them to pass by. The basic feelings of like or dislike will never stop arising in these human bodies and minds, but the afflicted emotions of attachment (*I must have it!*) and aversion (*I must push it away or destroy it!*) will cease with practice. Eventually we will achieve awareness of the feeling (like or dislike) without the afflicted reaction. We can like things and not have to have them. We can dislike things and not have to hate or destroy them.

When we use the first, coarser cloth, we are accepting responsibility. We understand that our actions and our emotions are ours. The Buddha said, “*I am the doer, I am the owner, I am the heir, I am the relative, and I am the product of my actions*.” The first cycle of the Wheel of Dharma is to clean with the rough cloth, to renounce the causes of suffering, which are the afflicted emotions and the negative actions that arise from them. That is why it requires following the Precepts: renounce killing; renounce stealing; renounce deception, slander, and harsh speech; renounce sexual abuse, and renounce any form of intoxication that leads to heedlessness. They are the roughness of the first cloth and the brakes on the train of our negative tendencies.

The essence of the second cycle of the Wheel of Dharma, the one to which we apply the medium cloth, is to begin dealing directly with the conceptual obscurations. That is why, when Dolpopa summarizes the meaning of the second cycle, he says it is the Wheel of No Characteristics. The first cycle is mostly concerned with our actions, and the second is where we begin to see how our minds work. Its thrust is to understand that the characteristics that we impute on ourselves, others, and our environment are

coming from our own minds, our own perceptions. The three basic false characteristics that we assign to our perceptions are substantiality, permanence, and independence.

We may think, for example, “This is just the way I am.” But nothing is permanent; everything is changing all the time. There is no permanent anything. We are changing every second. We also impute purity onto the impure. How many times have we desired something very badly because we thought it would make us happy, and when we got it, we found out differently? Appearance and reality are two different things. How many people, things, places, and situations have we misjudged one way or the other? The essence of the view of the second cycle is that appearances are our own creations.

The essence of the practice of the second cycle of the Wheel of Dharma is to question appearances. There are three easy questions that we can always ask: “Is this substantial? Is this permanent? Is this independent of causes and conditions?” When we do that analysis, all the false views start crumbling away. Just like a magic show, appearances only hold true if they are not analyzed. Once we analyze the magic show, we understand that it is based on sleight of hand and misdirection. The practice is to question, to look closely. It is called analytical meditation or contemplation, and it means to explore things without falling for appearances. Nothing withstands those questions. Everything we perceive is an image in the mind. If it is an image in the mind, is it substantial? Can we constantly hold a single appearance in the mind, or must it change? Can the image be independent of causes and conditions, including our own tendencies, likes and dislikes? Is the image independent of us?

Finally, there is the third cycle of the Wheel of Dharma, the softest cloth, which is Buddha Nature. The central teaching here is that all sentient beings have Buddha Nature, and the practice is to manifest our Buddha Nature. We do not have to wait for this manifestation to magically happen. Every moment of every day we can act in an enlightened way. We can do it because we are it. We do not have to “fake it ‘till we make it.” We do not need to assume our Buddha Nature as a disguise. We have at this moment, fully and perfectly, all that we need. It is not something that is a future project. Every time we make a choice, we can make the awakened choice. If we string together many of those choices, we will find that we are living an awakened life. All the teachings of the third cycle are leading us to be what we already are. There is no need to pretend to ourselves and others that we are less than we are. We have always had it, but the question is, how much of what we have do we want to manifest? Manifesting takes effort. If we are committed to doing this, we must make a choice and carry it through. That is the essential view and practice of the third cycle of the Wheel of Dharma.

In summary, the essence or view of the first cycle of Dharma, the rough cloth, is karma, renouncing the causes of suffering, and accepting full responsibility for our actions. The practice is to develop awareness, apply the antidotes, and follow the Precepts. The view of the second turning is to understand the absence of inherent characteristics, and the practice is analysis. The essential view of the third cycle of the Wheel of Dharma is that we all have Buddha Nature, and the practice is to manifest it, to live it.

> *The Dharma is like water that washes off dirt. As a well, a pond, a stream, a river, a valley stream, a ditch, or a great sea, each alike effectively washes off all kinds of dirt, so the Dharma effectively washes off the dirt of all delusions of living beings.*
>
> *The nature of water is one, but a stream, a river, a well, a pond, a valley stream, a ditch, and a great sea are different from one another. The nature of the Dharma is like this.*
>
> *There is equality and no differentiation in washing off the dirt of delusions, but the three conducts, the four merits, and the two ways are not one and the same.*

Though each washes equally as water, a well is not a pond, a pond is not a stream or a river, nor is a valley stream or a ditch a sea. As the Buddha Tathagata, the Victor, is free in the Dharma, all the teachings preached by Him are also like this.

Though preaching at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end all alike effectively wash off the delusions of living beings, the beginning is not the middle, and the middle is not the end. Preaching at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end are the same in expression, but different from one another in meaning.
—Buddha Shakyamuni, Sutra of Innumerable Meanings

Living the teachings is the key, and that is why, in our lineage, the Kalachakra, a higher tantra, is so important. Many people have mystical ideas about the Kalachakra, but the Sanskrit word is a combination of *kala* (time) and *chakra* (wheel). It means that we must bring into time, into our current experience, our Buddha Nature. Bring it here. Do not keep it on a conceptual platform because, if it is not here, it is not anywhere. The fourth fundamental Bodhisattva Vow is, "*The Great Middle Way is unsurpassable, I vow to become it for the benefit of all*." We vow to bring our Buddha Nature into time, which means to bring it into the present.

If we are going to be Buddhas, let us be Buddhas here, where it is helpful and necessary. Let's be our best here, now. That is what it's about. It is not that someday, if we are good enough, we will be free. The true meaning of freedom is that *we choose our behavior*; our habits do not dictate our behavior. We are not constrained. We do not react out of afflicted emotions and wrong views; we respond to situations out of principle. That is freedom. That is why we can say, enlightenment in this body, in this lifetime. That is what Kalachakra really means.

TWENTY-FIVE

I bow to the Lamas who teach that Buddha Essence has another cause and result. The other cause is the luminous form of emptiness, and the other result is immutable great bliss, spontaneously self-arisen.

Buddha Essence is basically another way to say Buddha Nature, but we could make the technical distinction that Buddha Essence is unmanifest Buddha Nature —the core of that nature. In conventional reality, all causes and results are phenomenal: they are empty of substance, independence, and permanence. They are just perceptions without any true existence. What Dolpopa says here is that Buddha Essence has "another cause," not a material or conventional cause.

This point is important because there were, and still are, lineages that claim that Buddha Nature is something that is not already present but is cultivated through practice. In other words, it has a cause in conventional reality. However, Dolpopa reaffirms the teaching of "another cause and result," which means Buddha Essence is not something that is caused by any of our actions. Then he says, the "other cause (that is not a conventional cause) is the luminous form of emptiness." The luminous form of emptiness is the indivisible union of wisdom and compassion —self-arising, pure, blissful, and permanent. The Buddha says in the Anguttara Agama:

> *Luminous is the mind. And it is freed from incoming defilements. The well-instructed disciple of the Noble Ones discerns that it actually is present, which is why I tell you that —for the well-instructed disciple of the Noble Ones— there is development of the mind.*

The Buddha Essence that in conventional reality we perceive as being separated and manifesting in different beings, is caused by the "luminous form of emptiness." This Buddha Essence is undifferentiated; it is not cut up into little pieces. Each sentient being does not have his or her own Buddha Essence. There is just Buddha Essence. It is not particular to a sentient being, as in, "My Buddha Essence is better than your Buddha Essence."

We need to understand this clearly because in most other religious traditions, there are some individuals who are, by nature, holier than others. In Christianity, for example, there are some who are born without original sin (Jesus and the Virgin Mary in some Christian sects), so they are holier from the beginning. However, Buddhism does not have that idea. Dolpopa explains here that, behind what we perceive as the individually manifesting qualities of Buddha Nature, is Buddha Essence. Buddha Essence, in a sense, is the origin of Buddha Nature, if we take Buddha Nature to be the particular manifestation of Buddha Essence in individual beings. Buddha Essence is the basis, or what we sometimes call the Primordial Buddha. Buddha means awake, so Primordial Buddha is not an individual, but primordial wakefulness; that is Buddha Essence.

What is the "other" cause of this Buddha Essence? Dolpopa tells us that it is "the luminous form of emptiness." When we speak of the pure mind, we say that its nature is empty luminosity. Buddha Essence is "other caused" by the union, the indivisible union of emptiness and luminosity. Emptiness manifests as luminosity, and we could turn it around and say that luminosity manifests as emptiness. So, the "other cause" is the inseparability of emptiness and luminosity. What is the result of that? What does this Buddha Essence cause?

Dolpopa tells us that the result is "immutable great bliss." This bliss should not be thought of as some big party in the sky. The Buddha's teaching is about suffering and the cessation of suffering, and immutable great bliss is the permanent cessation of suffering. The cessation of suffering is not a blank state. It is not numbness. Rather, it is bliss that is immutable, which means it cannot be changed because it has, as its great cause, the inseparability of emptiness and luminosity.

The first wrong view is separation, and the first thing that we separate is the emptiness of the mind from the luminosity of the mind. If we favor the luminous side, we fall into externalism, in which we impute substantial existence to things that are not substantial. If we favor the emptiness side, we fall into nihilism, in which nothing is thought to be true or real. Our minds are empty luminosity, but we humans separate these along with everything else. What Dolpopa says is that, in truth, there is no separation; there is indivisibility. The indivisibility of this luminous emptiness of the mind has a result. When we do not divide, when we do not separate, there is immutable great bliss. He adds the phrase that this bliss is "spontaneously self-arisen" to counteract our typical, conventional view of cause and effect. The cause and effect here are simultaneous, but that is difficult for our linear, sequential minds to comprehend. We tend to think that the empty luminosity comes first and the great bliss later, but their arising is not caused, but is "spontaneously self-arisen." Self-arisen means it is not produced by the conjunction of causes and conditions. It has no beginning, and therefore has no end.

This teaching is practical. We must understand that our fundamental problem, the cause of our suffering, is the tendency to separate. Even when we separate the good and the pure things, we are embracing ignorance. Ignorance is not a thing. It is an absence, a lack of wisdom, just like darkness is an absence of light. Ignorance does not come from anywhere, but is a lack of awareness of wholeness, of perfection, of the indivisibility of emptiness and luminosity. When we make that split, we have entered into the universe of duality in which all things, including luminosity and emptiness, are perceived as separate and categorized as such. We make all sorts of distinctions and bring those into our lives. We are so many millennia into this whole human experience, and yet we are still dealing with the same fundamental stupidity of separation between genders, races, cultures, countries, religions, political ideas, etc. What this ignorance causes is an unending negative chain of events. Our great teacher Vasubandhu said that what we need is a "revolution at the base." The basis of our suffering is separation, and revolution means to turn it around and return to the indivisibility of emptiness and luminosity, of wisdom and compassion.

This teaching is not just philosophy; it is an exhortation to stop dividing. It is in our power to stop this. In the game of chess there is a move called castleing, in which you move your tower and put your king behind the tower. It is a move of ultimate protection. We are all doing that, and when we do, we have stopped all possibility of understanding. We have raised a wall between ourselves and reality. From that position, we can commit atrocities. The only reason, for example, that we can do what we do to animals is that we have castled behind this idea that we are the dominant species, and everything is here to serve us. When we do that, we hide behind a wall, and we arrange not to look at the brutality and the suffering. We have someone else do that work for us behind other very high walls. This process goes on in so many fundamental aspects of human activity, and sadly, religion is a central force behind this behavior.

When we stop separating, we move closer to immutable great bliss. We do not have to go out and cultivate it; it is spontaneously self-arisen. If we stop dividing and separating, we do not have to do anything else in order to be happy. This is the lesson that Dolpopa gave to the monks who originally received this teaching, and it is the lesson that we can also receive. We must stop separating. Even sometimes in our so-called compassion, we only separate further. Thinking that, "There but for the grace of God go I," can be a way of saying, "You poor thing suffering down there, while I am up here." The prefix, *com,* in the word compassion means with, and *passion* is from the Greek, *pathos*, which means suffering. Therefore, compassion means to be with the same experience, the same suffering as every other sentient being. That is the opposite of separation.

Once we stop the separation, samsara does not go away, but we understand what is happening, and we eventually develop the ability to be in it, feel extreme compassion, and at the same time know that none of it is ultimately real. Ultimately, none of this suffering is real, because suffering is caused by ignorance, and ignorance is an absence. All the products of ignorance are equally absent. Where does the darkness go when the lights are turned on? Does it go and hide in a closet? Darkness does not exist; it is an absence of light. In the same way, ignorance does not exist. It is an absence of wisdom. When there is wisdom, the darkness of ignorance disappears.

> *Covered by the veils of disturbing emotions, one is a sentient being. Freed from disturbing emotions, one is called a Buddha.* —Nagarjuna

However, our experience at this point is conventional and not ultimate. As long as there is external separation, as long as we are embodied sentient beings, we have to respect the fact that our suffering and the suffering of others is conventionally real, just as a dreamer may be truly frightened by a tiger who appears in a dream. The fear is real, even if the tiger is not. The cause may be false, but the suffering is real. Enlightenment is not a magical disappearance of the world of samsara, but a deep penetration or insight into its non-substantiality. That non-substantiality does not mean that entities are not suffering. The Buddhas simultaneously see no separation, and the separation that sentient beings see. They are moved to compassion, not to judgment. They are moved to help, not to condemn.

We are not here to judge anyone —not because we are saintly, but because it does not work. What is judgement but more separation? There are religious worldviews that posit that once we get rid of all the bad apples and put them in hell, we are going to have paradise. This attitude is not helpful. The so-called bad apples are sentient beings who have gone so far behind the wall of separation that they cannot see. It is not that they do not want to see; they cannot. They have placed themselves behind a wall, but we need to understand that they are hurting. We tend to judge only the pain they are inflicting on others, but because there is no separation, they are inflicting that pain on themselves as well.

Our desire must be to reduce their suffering; when we look at it that way, we have a better chance to get through to them than by judging and attacking them. It does little good to point out to someone the horrible things they are doing to other beings. If we look at them as perpetrators, then we have also created a wall that we cannot breach. If we look at them as makers of their own suffering, we can have more compassion and not create a wall of separation. To borrow some biblical language, “what they do unto others, they do unto themselves.” When we understand that they are suffering, that what they are doing is a product of their suffering, and that they are compounding their own suffering, we will find an empathy that is tangible. When we approach other sentient beings without compassion but with harsh judgement, they know it, and they raise their walls even higher. We must not come at them with our walls raised already.

The origin of ignorance is not evil. It is a deficiency, an absence, a deviation of wisdom. It has its origin in the separation of emptiness and luminosity, neither of which is bad. Ignorance is not irremediable. We need to overcome our own ignorance first. As Buddhists, we pray what is called the Definitive Aspiration, in which we dedicate all the merit of everyone, from the Buddhas to ordinary beings, past, present, and future, so that, “I may arise spontaneously in Dewachen.” This is not a selfish prayer, because we must take care of our own ignorance first before we can help others. To arise in Dewachen, often translated as the Pure Land of Bliss, is a wonderful metaphor for saying that we are reuniting emptiness and luminosity, wisdom and compassion, coming back to our nature or essence. We must do that first. We cannot help anyone as long as we view them as the other. That view is an affirmation of the problem.

We must also understand that, to live in this world, we need to make distinctions, but distinction is not the same as separation. Distinction is to be able to discern what is beneficial and what is not beneficial for ourselves and for others. There is ultimate reality, which is always true. However, we are operating in conventional reality, which can be merely valid or not valid. In conventional reality, I could claim that I am Napoleon, and that is not valid. Or I could say that I am Tashi Nyima, which is ultimately not true, but is valid in conventional reality. Judgement is different from the distinction of what is valid and not valid, beneficial and unbeneficial. Judgement is, "I am right, and they are wrong. I have Truth, and they do not. I am good, and they are bad." Judgement can easily creep in when we are making distinctions, so we must be vigilant. We must not rush in, thinking that we have the answers to everyone's problems because we have studied the Dharma. That is not necessarily being able to discern what is appropriate and what is not. That is not compassion but superiority, which is another way to reify separation. One of the major aspects of compassion is to know when it is prudent and beneficial to act.

Another thing that is very helpful is to focus on the good qualities that everyone has, and to turn their minds toward their good qualities. Good qualities, when brought to awareness, spread; just as bad qualities that are constantly pointed out, strengthen. Praise is more effective than censure, and everyone has some positive behavior that we can reinforce. Anyone who has been a teacher or even a student knows that when someone's shortcomings are harped on, they make little progress. However, when we point out a student's capacity and ability, they will flourish. That is true of all sentient beings. That is what it means to find common ground. Fortunately, the common ground that we all have is Buddha Essence. That is the common ground; everyone has it. It is impossible for a sentient being not to manifest that Buddha Nature in some way. We need to be looking for that and encourage it. Buddha Nature breaks through in the most unexpected ways. The deeper someone may go in a negative direction, the more Buddha Nature will break through in other ways.

It takes a great deal of effort and energy to complain about others and to judge. We could use that complaining and judging energy to do something beneficial. If we have the energy to cry, we have the energy to smile, and it takes less effort to smile. It takes less effort to manifest our true nature than it does to go against our true nature. Ultimately it is easier to smile and to stop separating. In physics, we learn that to split the atom not only takes a lot of energy, it also releases an explosion. The atomic explosion is a physical manifestation of the effect of separation. When we separate, we blow things up. If we are there blowing things up, we will also be in the blast range. So, let us keep it together: wisdom and compassion, emptiness and luminosity. That is "immutable great bliss, spontaneously self-arisen."

TWENTY-SIX — TWENTY-SEVEN — TWENTY-EIGHT

I bow to the Lamas who teach that many various names —such as Secret, Great Secret, Element of Space, Universal Matrix, Source of Phenomena, Lotus, Womb, Lion Throne, Lady of Selflessness, and Fierce Sublime Ignorance— have one meaning: emptiness.

I bow to the Lamas who teach that many names of precisely That —such as Indestructible, Drop, Life-Drinker, Gathering, Restraint, Wonderful, Great Compassion, Primordial Buddha, and Enlightenment Mind —have one meaning: great bliss.

I bow to the Lamas who teach that many names —such as Priest of the Buddhas, Life, Ruler of Time, Closed Circle, Indomitable Hero, Destroyer of Illusion, and Hidden Assembly— have one meaning: unity.

Dolpopa wrote this Handbook for the benefit of those Jonang monks who were not inclined to much study and were more involved with other activities like service, ritual, music, and art. In the Dharma, there are many gates for everyone, including monks. When Dolpopa became the fourth Throne Holder of Jonang, he saw that it was good that monks had diverse interests, but felt that all of them should have a basic understanding of the Dharma. That is why he composed this Handbook, which was written as a prayer, so it could be recited daily by all monks and thereby become shared and basic doctrine. The question then arises, why does it seem so impenetrable for us at times? It was not unintelligible for the monks of Dolpopa's time, but it is impenetrable for us who live in a different context, culture, time, and place. Dolpopa was not trying to be obscure, even though these three verses may seem meaningless to most Westerners and most non-Vajrayana Buddhists.

In Tibet, an important, non-sectarian movement called Rime arose in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Those in the Rimé recognized a 16th century Jonang Lama, Taranatha, as the father of the movement. Taranatha, also a Throne Holder of Jonang, was a faithful follower of Kunchen Dolpopa, who began speaking of non-sectarian views several hundred years earlier, when it was first apparent that the different Buddhist lineages were becoming intolerant of others' views.

The various names listed in these verses, which to us mean very little, are the names that different lineages use for wisdom, emptiness, compassion, bliss, and for the union of wisdom and compassion. Dolpopa was asking his monks to recite that all these names have a common basis. He was encouraging them not to become distracted by the differences in presentation. If we are overly distracted by the differences, we can easily fall into sectarianism, which assumes that someone who says something in a different way must be wrong. Dolpopa instructs us that non-sectarianism is at the very heart of the Dharma. It is not optional, not something that only exceedingly good Buddhists can understand, but something every follower of the Dharma must come to recognize. Dolpopa lived in a time when Tibet was overwhelmingly Buddhist; even the followers of the native Bon religion had adopted Buddhism. However, had he lived among a plurality of faiths, his stance would not have changed. His point is, if we truly respect the Dharma and the teachings of the Buddha, we must respect and encourage the freedom of all sentient beings to pursue cultivation in the way that they see fit. We cannot go around saying, "Ours is the one, true way."

> *Ultimate Nature cannot be fully measured by our samsaric mind. The great saints (siddhas) and scholars examined it from different aspects, and each of the ways outlined by them has many reasons and logical sequences. If we follow the tradition of our own lineage and study our own lineage masters in depth, we shall find no need to feel sectarian. However, if we confuse the terms and systems of different traditions, or if we try to introduce the ways of other systems because we do not have a deep understanding of our own tradition, we shall surely make our minds as muddled as the yarns of a bad weaver.* — Jamgon Kongtrul

Being non-sectarian does not mean that we become eclectic. Eclecticism means picking from here and there and making our own stew. The problem with eclecticism is that we are choosing, from our beginner's state, from ignorance, what we like and do not like from many different traditions.Although internally coherent, they are not necessarily compatible with each other. A practice might make perfect sense within one context, but may clash with a view or a practice which comes from another context. If we are driving to a particular destination and keep changing our route, we may never arrive. We need to choose. Other routes may get us there too, but we must travel on one of them. Dolpopa is not saying that all philosophies or approaches are the same. That assumption leads to utter confusion and to paralysis. Dolpopa recommends that we pick the one with which we resonate, and stay consistent with it, but respect and even encourage others to follow their own. Know deep inside that although we have made our choice, other methods are valid —just as valid to their practitioners as ours is to us.

The differences among the various names that Dolpopa lists are more than merely semantic. Some of them are based on tantras that involve extensive visualization, for example, and others invoke wrathful aspects. Dolpopa does not say here that these are all equally valid choices. He is saying there are people who have chosen differently, and we respect them. There are differences beyond the name, so we do not mix and match, but they are all respectable and share a common basis.

We cannot force our views on others, and must approach the views of others with compassion. Non-sectarianism does not mean that we do not have a view or are not free to debate other's views. Dolpopa wrote extensively about wrong views within Buddhism. His entire Mountain Doctrine is a refutation of wrong views, as is The Fourth Council. However, he never attacks those who hold wrong views as evil. Many of his prayers, directed at his philosophical opponents, state: "I come to you with folded hands, imploring you to see things as they are." Today we are quick to demonize everyone, and that is a big problem. It turns us into that which we dislike. If we become sectarian, we create the conditions for our own persecution and are giving others a reason to attack us. When Dolpopa uttered the famous phrase, "At Jonang we do not take sides, especially not our own side," he was not saying that we have no view. Clearly, we have our own view. Taking sides means making exclusive claims for our own views and condemning other views. It is not based on reason or principle or compassion, but on attachment.

There is an important distinction that the Dharma wants us to make. There are no evil beings, but there are wrong views, wrong words, wrong actions, wrong livelihoods. We can point out what is contrary to the Dharma, but we do not hate those who hold those wrong views. My teacher used to say all the time, "We do not have to like all beings, but we must love them." The human problem is the problem of ignorance. The first wrong view is the view of separation, and some of us are very good at that. The remedy to this view is to start seeing that we are just like others. We have the qualities and the defects of others in different permutations.

Fundamentally, we all want to be happy. We have not managed it yet, and neither have most other beings. Unfortunately, some believe that to be happy, they must suppress everyone else, which the Dharma says is an extremely wrong view. That is why Dolpopa is specifically acknowledging the names that the Jonang do not invoke or necessarily accept. He is translating for his monks that when a certain name is used by others, the Jonang would use another term, but both basically mean something similar. Dolpopa affirms that other Buddhist lineages and their practitioners are not fundamentally different. All want enlightenment, but some are going about it in different ways and with different terminology.

The ignorance of separation is a wrong view, not an action. I often give the example that I love cobras, but I do not sleep with them. To overcome separation does not mean that all beings must be lumped close together. It does mean that I must not devise a campaign for the eradication of cobras in the world; cobras should be respected, have their own habitat, and be protected. In my dwelling, for example, I do not exterminate insects. I encourage them to go outside. Separation is an attitude, a

wrong view. In this world, there are things that are suitable for us and things that are not. We must choose what is suitable; we must do what is needed, but we do not have to taint it with animosity.

There are things that we do not want, and we have every right not to want them and work towards keeping them away. For example, we have every right to not agree with a politician, and every right to work so that he or she does not come into or remain in power. What we do not have the right to do, what is not good for us, is to feel personal animosity or hatred towards that politician. We are not enlightened yet, so we should not put ourselves in situations where we would probably become angry and resentful. The scriptures say that if a Buddha is sitting with two beings on each side, and one is fanning Him and the other is stabbing Him with a dagger, the Buddha does not have a different feeling toward either of them. Are we there yet? If not, we probably should avoid the guy with the dagger. The Buddha can do it. But we are not always ready and may need to keep a distance.

The names listed here are all different but are all consonant with the Dharma. We must look at intention and look at the ultimate reason for views and practices. When we look at the ultimate intention behind all human views and practices, correct or mistaken, it is always to become happy. The Buddha did not speak of right or wrong in the conventional moral sense. He used the words *kushala* (skillful) and *akushala* (unskillful). Is something skillful in leading to happiness for ourselves and others? Some things are very unskillful and do not produce happiness for anyone. Physical harm is very unskillful, and that is why it is the first precept: do not kill.

For practices, the Buddha used the term, *samyak*, which we translate as "right." But this is "right" in the sense of direction. We could also translate *samyak* as "straight." Therefore, when we say Right View, it is a view that leads to liberation. A wrong view is not necessarily morally wrong; it just leads us away from liberation. Right Intention is a thought that leads to liberation, and those thoughts that are not "right" lead us away from liberation. The Buddha always spoke of our experience. Meta-ethical questions about what is wrong and what is right are subject to culture, time, place, and circumstance. We have our preferences, and that is fine, but we cannot elevate them to the level of absolute truth because our preferences change over time. The Buddha, who was fully enlightened, simply pointed out that certain views, thoughts, words, and deeds are conducive to liberation and enlightenment, and some are not.

We have in this text the inclusiveness of non-sectarianism. It is at the very heart of the Jonang lineage of Buddhism, and it is fundamental to what and who we are. We encourage everyone to go and listen to other lineage teachers and to read books from other lineages. We need to be exposed to other views. We need to know what else is out there, as some of it may be helpful, or even more suitable for some. The duty given to me by my Lama was not to make Jonangpas or even to make Buddhists. The duty given to me by my teacher was to help beings manifest their Buddha Nature, to become Buddhas. Whatever lesser designation we choose is immaterial. No matter what we call ourselves, I want all of us to manifest perfect enlightenment.

A very broad definition of the term Dharma is a teaching based on true knowledge, or wisdom. Thus, Dharma is what brings us knowledge of both conventional and ultimate reality. The Dharma is not Indian, Tibetan, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, European, or American.

Because the Dharma was taught originally in Asian countries, and it was there that it has been preserved until recently, there is a tendency to equate the cultural expressions of the Dharma in those areas with the Dharma itself. However, admixed with the pure Dharma is an enormous accretion of local customs, as well as elements characteristic of the decadence of our present era of the Five Defilements. Therefore, we find gross superstitions, rituals of all types for dubious purposes, and other mundane components of local cultures admixed with the expression of the Dharma.

The Dharma is pure, beyond any geographic or temporary influence, transcultural, and universal. It is this universal Dharma that all the true lineages wish to distribute to the world. The world is not interested in one more mundane manifestation of cultural religiosity. We are all searching for that pure and complete wisdom that can give meaning and purpose to life; a universal knowledge that makes our lives healthier and happier.

We harbor no doubts about the validity of the views and practices of extant Asian Buddhist lineages. The scriptures of the Pali, Chinese, Tibetan, and Gandharan canons are faithful expositions of the Dharma, and the commentaries of the Great Masters make them accessible.

The essence of Buddhist view and practice —the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination, the Four Immeasurables, the Six Transcendent Excellences, the Five Paths, Buddha Nature, and the vast quantity of information about the mind, the afflicted emotions, the obscurations to wisdom, and their antidotes— all this is perfectly legitimate, explained in the scriptures and by all the acharyas in the extant lineages. This is a great treasure, the clear and perfect knowledge that human society needs and that transforms the lives of all who receive it.

However, there are external aspects of Buddhist practice, and the ways in which this knowledge is presented in the West, where there is a clear confusion between that which is truly Dharma and that which is merely ethnic culture. Because Dharma culture was dominant in various Asian countries for many centuries, many aspects of Asian culture are indeed in agreement with the Dharma. They are true expressions of Dharma principles in a particular time and place. However, those same cultural forms, imposed on a different time and place, cease to be expressions of Dharma, and become mere nostalgic manifestations of ethnic chauvinism. Dharma is not a set of fixed rules concerning sartorial styles, table manners, musical fashions, and other cultural manifestations, but rather the principles informing all actions.

Our mission in continuing a lineage of Dharma transmission is not to be ambassadors of a specific ethnic culture, regardless of how beautiful, noble, and worthy of conservation it may be. Our mission is to bring the salvific teachings of the Dharma to all sentient beings, regardless of their culture.

We represent Buddha Shakyamuni and His disciplic succession (to *re-present* means to present again). Instead of assuming that some specific cultural expression “is Dharma'' because it was done in the past in a localized manifestation, we should always discriminate between universal Dharma principles and their particular expressions. Even if a universal Dharma principle was perfectly expressed at some point in time in a specific location, it does not necessarily follow that the same principle can be expressed identically in a different context.

The history of every Buddhist lineage is precisely one of continuous change and adaptation; it is a manifestation in a place, a time, and a context (*desha-kala-patra*). To refuse to change the mode of presentation of the Dharma is perhaps the most ominous and insidious of change ideologies; it is a deviation from a fundamental order, a betrayal of the Buddha’s mission for the redemption of all sentient beings.

Dharma culture is neither internally nor externally standardized. It varies from one place to another, and from time to time. What is not variable in the Dharma is the science that informs the different practices for advancement, culminating in full enlightenment. Thus, it is counterproductive to present the teachings, regardless of how wonderful, bound in an ethnic and exotic format.

Every culture in the material world is always in a state of flux. That is, its core beliefs and values are expressed in varying forms (language, art, architecture, dress, cuisine, behaviors, etc.) according to the context in which it manifests. Change is an essential characteristic of material existence. Even as Buddha

Shakyamuni appeared in a place-specific, time-specific, and context-specific Form, so must the Lineage be "reborn" in each specific place, time, and circumstance.

We need not "Westernize" the Dharma, but rather propagate the Dharma in the West. In order to do so, we express the immutable principles of the Dharma in our own place, time, and context. Proper Asian fashion, the ability to quote and etymologize foreign words, and the gross imitation of Asian accents, idiosyncrasies, and mannerisms do not and cannot make us pure Dharma practitioners. In fact, these external forms that some mistakenly accept as signs of advancement often prevent the pure message of the Dharma from penetrating the minds and hearts of sincere Western seekers.

We express Dharma principles in a manner that is authentic in this place, time, and circumstance. Great Middle Way Buddhism (Skt. *mahamadhyamaka*; Tib. *dBu ma chenpo*) originated in India, developed in Tibet, and is now taking root in the West. In order to be faithful to the Jonang Lineage, we must constantly re-new it.

Ultimately, what matters is our thoughts, words, and deeds. This is a path of practice. A path is the trail on which we walk. Antonio Machado, a Spanish poet, wrote: *Caminante, son tus huellas el camino, y nada más; Caminante, no hay camino; se hace camino al andar.* (Your own footsteps are the path, there is no other path but the one on which you walk.) Each path is unique and begins where you are. The Buddha gives us guidance on how to walk and how to make progress, but it is up to us to do it.

We cultivate by following our path with patience, knowing that simply noticing our unwholesome thoughts and feelings is great progress. Most people do not notice, and when they do, they are full of justifications. The First Noble Truth is about realizing suffering: looking at it straight in the face, not flinching, and not pretending it is not there. However, pretending it is not there is the most common choice for most people. The second most common choice is to decide that our suffering is someone else's fault. The third most common choice is to blame ourselves. All three reactions are moving us in the wrong direction. Suffering is the nature of this world of duality. We have created the causes and conditions in our karmic continuum, but we did not create birth, disease, aging, and death. Do not assign or assume blame for things that are the nature of duality. In duality, there is suffering. However, we must recognize that we can make it much worse, or much better, or get out of the cycle altogether. To abandon suffering, we must practice the path of Dharma, and that requires compassion for ourselves and others. If we acknowledge our capacity to make things worse, we can acknowledge the opposite, and gain some control.

I belonged originally to a different lineage. What most inspired me about the Jonang was the complete lack of sectarian spirit and the dedication to not only "allow" freedom, but to actively encourage it, even when it apparently goes against the lineage's interests. That freedom is the essential foundation of the Dharma. If we do not have freedom, then we cannot choose to be enlightened. Freedom is essential.

TWENTY-NINE

I bow to the Lamas who teach that united, indivisible, of one taste, indestructible, self-arisen primordial awareness, the Primordial Buddha, is present in all as thusness with stains, like the all-encompassing sky, and exists as the universal ground.

Here we come to the very heart of the teaching of the Buddha, as understood and proclaimed by the Mahayana and especially in the Jonang Vajrayana. Without Buddha Nature, there is no possibility of attaining enlightenment. As we have said many times, a lemon tree cannot give oranges. An orange tree will not give lemons. Things can become more clearly what they already are, but they cannot become what they are not. A human baby does not in time "become human" as she grows and develops; the human baby is human from the moment of conception. In fact, the humanity of that baby —that is to say, her human karma— precedes conception. In the same way, the only reason it is possible for us to be enlightened is because that is our nature.

Why does Dolpopa speak here of "Primordial Buddha"? When we speak of the Buddha Nature of sentient beings, we are assuming (at least linguistically) a fundamental level of ignorance, which consists of the view of separation, necessarily implying a multiplicity of distinct entities. Primordial Buddha is the undivided Buddha Essence. We make a distinction between essence and nature. Essence is the ground, the basis. Nature is the way it is expressed. When we say that Buddha Nature manifests in all sentient beings, we are implicitly acknowledging multiplicity. But the ground of that Nature, the basis of that, is Buddha Essence or Primordial Buddha. Primordial Buddha is not a thing, not a person, not an entity, not a Buddhist version of a primal mover or an omnipotent creator, but the ground of reality. It is the *alaya* (Tib. *kung gzhi*) —the universal ground of all.

Dolpopa explains that the basis is non-dual. There is no subject/object division. It is indivisible, meaning that even if we appear to be many, there is no multiplicity of entities. It is of one taste, meaning that it does not become something different according to time, place, and circumstance. It may express itself differently, but it does not become something different. It is indestructible; it cannot be lost, no matter what we do or how much we become covered by ignorance, wrong views, or afflicted emotions. We cannot be severed from our essence and our nature.

There is a category of beings that is mentioned in the sutras as being cut off from Buddha Nature, the *icchantika*. Some have sadly misunderstood that there are beings who are permanently cut off from enlightenment. However, what the Buddha intended and what our Lamas have explained is that in one or more particular lifetimes, some beings may be cut off from fully manifesting their Buddha Nature. That should not be surprising, because in any lifetime many possibilities are cut off for individuals to fully experience. I am, for example, cut off from being blonde and blue-eyed, playing the piano extremely well, or speaking Russian in this lifetime. I do not have the karma to manifest those traits and skills. That does not mean that at another time I would be unable to have those traits or skills. Traits, skills, and Buddha Nature are not the same, so that is where the analogy breaks down. However, the principle is the same: being cut off in a particular lifetime does not mean permanent separation. If it were possible to permanently separate from the universal ground, that would mean absolute non-existence. If we were out of the realm of absolute reality, we would not exist at all. Buddha Nature is indestructible, regardless of what we do.

Earlier we discussed not excluding anyone from our compassion and loving kindness. However abhorrent we find the actions of someone, his or her Buddha Nature is incorruptible and indestructible. It is always there. What that Buddha Nature requires is to be identified, uncovered, and nourished. That does not happen through blame, condemnation, and punishment. On the contrary, it can only be nourished through generosity, encouragement, instruction, and example. We have much evidence of

this in the life of the Buddha, most strikingly in His encounter with the serial killer Angulimala (*anguli* means finger, and *mala* means garland), and this killer wore a garland of the fingers of his victims around his neck. He had made a vow that he would wear a garland of one thousand fingers. When he needed only one more victim to complete the garland, he was ready to kill even his own mother. The Buddha perceived this and decided to get in the way.

The Buddha stepped in front of Angulimala, providing him with an alternate target, and began to walk at a slow pace. Angulimala ran after Him to kill Him, but could not catch Him. Finally, Angulimala became exhausted from pursuing the Buddha, and yelled, "Stop." The Buddha turned and calmly said, "I have stopped, but you have not." The Buddha had stopped harming sentient beings, and Angulimala had not. At that moment, Angulimala realized what he had been doing, expressed his repentance, and knelt in front of the Buddha, expecting condemnation and punishment. However, the next words of the Buddha were, "Rise, Monk," which at the time was the formal way of initiation into the monastic Sangha. Here we have the greatest serial killer of his time, and we see that the Buddha did not punish Angulimala; He corrected him.

We do not all have the same liberating power as the Buddha, but this is still an example for us of getting in the way of harm and, more importantly, of not judging people who are acting out of ignorance. They are acting against their own best interests, and that is reason enough to generate deep compassion for them. It is said in the sutras that a parent with many children may love them all equally but takes greater care of those who have inferior capacity. This is done not out of greater love, but because there is greater need. The people who are doing things that are unwholesome need more, not less, compassion. Nagarjuna, another of our great teachers, wrote a letter of advice to a young king, and recommended developing compassion for all, especially for those who commit heinous crimes. They are the ones most in need of instruction, correction, and loving kindness. When Dolpopa says that Buddha Nature is indestructible, he reminds us that there is not a single sentient being who is cut off from this Nature and for whom it is impossible, at some point, to manifest Buddha Nature. It may not happen on our timeline, but Buddha Nature is indestructible.

Then Dolpopa uses the phrase "self-arisen primordial awareness." We are dealing with human language, and human language is a product of the human mind and human experience. Therefore, by its very nature, it is limited. Sometimes we must fashion phrases that attempt to let us conceive the inconceivable. This phrase directs us to conceive, however dimly, of something that is beyond our current experience. "Self-arisen" means not dependent on causes and conditions, which is beyond our experience because our awareness is based on causes and conditions. We are aware of this or aware of that, aware of self or aware of others, etc. "Self-arisen" means there is no cause and no condition for primordial awareness. "Primordial" means that the awareness was never absent. Even if we were not aware of awareness, it has always been there.

Dolpopa clearly tells us that what he calls the Primordial Buddha is not a person, individual, entity, or the highest of the high gods. It is self-arisen, primordial awareness. This is important because the natural tendency of the human mind is to reify, to make something that is not a thing into a thing. Primordial Awareness is not a guy that we hang out with. Rather, self-arisen Primordial Awareness is present in all as "thusness with stains." Thusness means "things as they are." It is a term that was invented by Buddhologists. The word is an attempt to translate the Sanskrit, *tathata*, which means "that-ness."

> *All explanations by words are provisional and without validity, for they are merely used in accordance with conventions and are incapable of denoting Suchness. The term Suchness likewise has no attributes which can be verbally specified. The term Suchness is, so to speak, the limit of verbalization, wherein a word is used to put an end to words*. —Asvaghosha

"Thusness with stains" means that this Primordial Buddha, when we do not see it manifest, is covered with stains. The metaphor that Dolpopa uses in his text is "the all-encompassing sky." He says that the sky (or space, which are interchangeable Buddhist terms), even if dark, or cloudy, or dusty, is not itself affected. Space is not affected by anything that appears in it. Space is non-obstruction. The one who is blocked or covered is the observer. Therefore, when we perceive impediments, stains, or limitations, that is our perception, just as when we see a cloudy sky. The sky is not actually obscured by clouds. It is a factor of our perspective when we look up. Similarly, when we perceive that the sun is out or not, that is completely our perception. The sun is always full and complete. It is our perspective that changes. The sky can never be polluted. Space is space. There is nothing there to pollute, so how can the sky become polluted or reduced?

> *Thusness manifests as wrong views in ordinary beings, as the reversal of these in those who see the truth, and as it is, in an unperverted way, free from elaboration, in a Tathagata. The impure, the impure-pure, and the utterly pure manifestations are expressed, in their given order, by the names "ordinary being," "Bodhisattva," and "Tathagata."* —Maitreya

Then Dolpopa says that the Primordial Buddha "exists as the universal ground." When a Buddhist uses the term "exists," that is big news. In Buddhism, existing means that something is substantial, permanent, and independent. Only Buddha Nature; self-cognizing, self-illuminating pristine wisdom; all ultimate Buddha qualities primordially indwelling intrinsically; the immutable thoroughly established nature; and Other Emptiness truly exist. Everything else is changing, insubstantial, and dependent on causes and conditions. We have that Buddha Nature, but it is based on the Buddha Essence or Primordial Buddha. It is much more correct to say that Buddha Nature has us. It is not that each of us has a little slice of Buddha Essence, but rather, because we are under the illusion of separation that Buddha Essence manifests in us "separately" as Buddha Nature. It manifests as "Thusness with stains." That is what we are: thusness with stains. We are part of that Primordial Buddha, but right now we are covered. The good news is that there are only two coverings: wrong views and afflicted emotions. We know what the problem is. The Buddha explained it in his first teaching. He told us there is suffering, and He told us what the cause of suffering is: wrong views and afflicted emotions. He identified the primary wrong views as separation and supremacy (self-grasping and self-cherishing). He identified the afflicted emotions as attachment, aversion, and indifference. This teaching is very simple and straightforward. We have learned many more complicated things at school or at work.

> *For one who clings, there is agitation; for one who has no clinging, there is no agitation. When there is no agitation, there is calm; when there is calm, there is no attachment; when there is no attachment, there is no coming and going; when there is no coming and going, there is no death and rebirth; when there is no death and rebirth, there is neither here nor there nor in-between. This is indeed the end of suffering.*
> —Buddha Shakyamuni

Eliminating these coverings takes effort, but what does not take effort in this *saha* world of struggle? Our "world" does not mean this planet but our experience. We are in the experience of struggle. Everything is a struggle. As long as we have the illusion of separation, we have to make an effort. We have habitual tendencies because we have put into motion a causal series that is heading in a certain direction. To turn that around in a new direction, to make a revolution at the base, takes effort. Effort is necessary, but the job is not impossible. The Buddha instructed us to avoid harm. He also instructed us to do good and purify the mind, and added that, if it were not possible to do those things, He would not ask them of us. It does not depend on having an advanced degree or a metaphysically-inclined mind. That is why there are 84,000 gates to the Dharma.

For some people, what is needed is just confidence. The Buddha said that compassion for all beings and confidence in the law of karma are enough. Of course, we can add practices to that basic understanding and probably shorten the time it takes, but those basics are enough. So, when the Buddha gives us these other practices and options, they are not required. Compassion is required. Wisdom is required.

Wisdom is not knowledge. The roots of the words vision and wisdom are related. To have wisdom is to see clearly: to see what is there as being there, and what is not there as not being there. In our prayer to our lineage Lama, Dolpopa, we say: "The entire sphere of objects of knowledge is pervaded by a single moment of your wisdom, apprehending whatever exists as existing, and whatever does not exist as not existing." What exists? Primordial Buddha exists. What does not exist? Wrong views and afflicted emotions do not exist because they are impermanent, they are dependent, and they are insubstantial. They are incidental stains that can be washed out. They are not intrinsic. They do not belong.

Buddha Nature is great news, and it is the essence of the Third Noble Truth. The truth of the cessation of suffering is the truth of Buddha Nature. The only reason there can be cessation of suffering is that what is real is self-arisen Primordial Awareness and nothing more. Without understanding Buddha Essence, there can be no confidence, and if there is no confidence, we will be overwhelmed by hindrances and obstructions. If we think it is just "you and me against the world," we are never going to solve this problem. We must understand that liberation and enlightenment are natural: suffering will end, and Buddha Nature will manifest. The Third Noble Truth is not the truth of the possibility of the cessation of suffering. It is a foregone conclusion.

The word the Buddha used for the Third Noble Truth, *nirodha*, means cessation. It does not mean potential or selective cessation. That is why we very confidently say that liberation from suffering is inevitable. It is our nature. When and how is up to us. In the Jonang, we make a bold offer: liberation and enlightenment in this body and in this lifetime. It is possible because it is our nature. That is the source of the guarantee. Without the truth of Buddha Nature, nothing is possible, and the Third Noble Truth is the only one of the Four Noble Truths that is ultimately true, because it is permanent. Suffering is not permanent because it can come to an end. For suffering to end, its causes must also come to an end. The path to the cessation of suffering is also impermanent. Once suffering has ceased, there is no need for a path to its cessation. Therefore, the Third Noble Truth is the only permanent truth.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Jonang lineage is that we bring the Third Noble Truth to the fore. It is not something we mention in passing. It is the good and the necessary news, the condition, the basis, the way, and the fruit of enlightenment. Buddha Nature is the ground, Buddha Nature is the path, and Buddha Nature is the result. We begin with Buddha Nature, cultivate that Buddha Nature, and the result is the fully manifest Buddha Nature. We start with thusness with stains, we gradually remove the stains, and we end up with thusness without stains. That is the Path. If we do not have certainty in Buddha Nature, then it is all just wishing and hoping, and the moment we hope, there is fear. Hope is the desire for something to be different from what it is. The moment we have that desire, we have the fear that it may not come to pass. One of our sayings is, "No hope, no fear." No hope means no fear. We do not have to hope. We have Buddha Nature. What more is there to hope for? We can be certain of Buddha Nature.

Remember that language is part of reality, and a part cannot encompass the whole. The truth is bigger than language. We can only point to this truth with words that allow us to look in the approximate direction where we will eventually see (know) directly our Buddha Nature. Eventually we will see our enlightenment and the enlightenment of all sentient beings. Our duty is to cultivate our own Buddha Nature and help others cultivate their Buddha Nature. When we point accusingly at others, we are declaring our own complicity in the problem. Let us stop pointing and start living the Dharma and manifesting our Buddha Nature. That is as simple as cultivating kindness. We have opportunities from

the moment we wake up each day. We are all surrounded by sentient beings, so we can be kind to insects, animals, and humans. It is possible. The “ground floor” opportunity includes kindness and certainty in Buddha Nature. One is wisdom and the other is compassion, and we can all do that.

THIRTY

I bow to the Lamas who teach the Vajra Yoga, the Perfection of Wisdom, the Ultimate Yoga, and the meditation of the Great Seal with its branches as the path, the method for freeing precisely That from the sheath of the five stains.

We have explained that Dolpopa refers in these verses to practices that may be unknown to us, but were very familiar to his audience. Here, he is referring to the different methods, views, and practices of his contemporaries in other Buddhist lineages. This text is about methods, and he begins with the Vajra Yoga, which is the technical name for the practice of the Jonangpas. The Perfection of Wisdom is the chosen method of those Buddhist lineages that focus more on analysis than on meditation, those who follow the second cycle of the Wheel of Dharma as the definitive teaching. Next, he mentions Ultimate Yoga, which is a direct reference to the Nyingma lineage's Ati Yoga, or Dzogchen. The meditation of the Great Seal is a reference to the Mahamudra of the Kagyu lineage, and "the branches as the path" is a reference to the Sakya Lamdre.

> *All the teachings of Buddha are of one taste, one way —all leading to the truth, all arriving at the truth. Although there are different paths, they neither contradict each other nor reject the basis of each other. The things that are fully made clear in the foundational paths are neither changed nor rejected by the higher paths, but accepted as they are. The points that are not made completely clear in the lower paths are made clear in the higher paths, but the basic structure is not changed and none of the points that are already clear are contradicted. Therefore, different paths and lineages do not go in different directions, and they do not arrive at different conclusions.* —Rangzom Chokyi Zangpo

Dolpopa mentions all the different approaches to Buddhist practice in Tibet and says that these are all methods for "freeing precisely That from the sheath of the stains." He does not say whether they work or not; he asserts that their purpose is the same. "Precisely That" is Thusness or Buddha Nature, and all these methods aim to help the practitioner manifest or uncover the Buddha Nature that is the true being of all sentience.

This teaching is clearly the origin of the non-sectarian movement. No one before Dolpopa had been so open to mention these practices on an equal basis. In fact, there was a strong movement towards sectarianism in Tibet. Dolpopa does not say that all these practices are the same, or that we can pick and choose different practices from different systems and mix them together and construct our own path. We have mentioned that "non-sectarian" does not mean eclectic. Eclecticism is typical of the New Age, in which Hindu understandings of chakras are mixed with Merlin's magic, along with Buddhist "mindfulness" and Taoist "alchemy". Non-sectarian means that we practice our own path but recognize and affirm the validity of other approaches. It does not mean that we mix and match, because every system has its basis, its methodology, and its approach. Even though other systems may be equally or similarly successful, if we keep going from one to the other, we may put together incompatible practices based on irreconcilable principles that will lead us nowhere.

A clarifying example may be to look at the fact that in the West there are now traditional healing systems available, and, of course, there is the conventional medical system. It is very popular to mix them together. However, they have different foundations and methodologies, and to use them together very often leads to a mutual cancellation of effects. For example, in some of the traditional healing methods, a symptom is not considered a problem but a manifestation of the vital force attempting to correct a problem. Therefore, symptoms are not suppressed but are strengthened and encouraged. Conventional medicine considers that the symptom is the disease and seeks to suppress it. So, if we are using both approaches at the same time, we will be fighting ourselves. We may each have our view

about which system is better, but if we are following one system, then we should follow that system exclusively. It makes no sense to cobble together things that are possibly antagonistic. Another example is trying to follow two GPS systems that are giving conflicting directions. There may be different ways to get to the place we are going, but we cannot follow them both at the same time.

Dolpopa very intentionally mentions these different systems and affirms their validity. We *respect* them all; we do not *practice* them all. It is very possible to disagree and still have respect. I have mentioned that if we read Dolpopa's other works, we see he has deep disagreements with many of his contemporaries. At no time does he vilify the other groups, but asks, "with folded hands" that they look more deeply at the consequences of their views and practices. In this text, Dolpopa mentions his method first, Vajra Yoga. The Handbook is a prayer to be recited by all Jonangpas, so it is clarifying for us to mention the familiar system first. The word "yoga" in classical Sanskrit simply means system, discipline, method, or practice. Vajra Yoga, then, is the name of the Jonang system of practice.

In this statement, Dolpopa establishes the basis of the Rimé or non-sectarian movement. Rimé is a movement and not a lineage. A lineage is a direct succession of teachers and disciples. In Buddhism, the succession originates with the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. The record of succession is kept by each lineage, and we have full lists of the line of teachers going back to the historical Buddha. What is the importance of lineage? Without the line of succession, we lack certainty that the teaching is not fabricated or distorted. The lineage itself may have problems, but at the very least, we know that there is a succession of teachers. If there is lineage, there is at minimum a chance that the teaching will be authentic. Without it, there is very little chance of that. Also, lineage gives the ability for the teaching to be reliably adapted to time, place, and circumstance. In Christianity, Protestantism was a rejection of lineage. The result is that there are thousands of Christian sects with no lineage. Anyone who can put a Bible under his or her arm can start a church and read scripture the way they want to read it. The result is that many become literalists, not understanding that every reading is an interpretation.

With lineage there is also interpretation, but there is the opportunity to maintain an accurate interpretation, without a break, passing on what it meant then, into what it means now. Language is not static but dynamic. Over time, in various places and cultures, words take on different connotations and meanings. A simple example is the familiar line from the Christian scripture, which says that it is harder for a rich person to enter heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Given our modern understanding of the eye of a needle, the obvious, literal teaching here would be that it is impossible for a rich person to go to heaven. However, at the time this scripture was written, the eye of the needle was the narrow entrance to a walled city —narrow because there are sandstorms in the desert. A camel is a stubborn animal and had to be directed from afar towards that narrow doorway. Otherwise, he may just sit down near the door and refuse to move. Given this historical understanding, the passage about a rich man's chance at heaven means something very different. Lineage provides the historical understanding. The lineage greatly increases the possibility that the intention behind the words is understood and preserved.

Many of the things that Dolpopa says here would be unintelligible to us without explanation. I would not be able to explain it now if I had not heard it from my teacher, and if my teacher had not heard it from his teacher. Of course, it is a human system and, therefore, is not perfect. Whenever we exchange information through words, things are lost. That is why we have both the long and the short succession in every authentic lineage. The long succession is the uninterrupted chain of teachers and disciples. The short succession is the reappearance (rebirth) of a teacher within the lineage to reestablish and reinvigorate the teachings. Dolpopa himself spent a great deal of time correcting understanding, as did Taranatha, who are both part of the short succession.

A movement, like the non-sectarian Rimé movement, is not specific to a lineage. One can be a part of this movement and agree on being non-sectarian, but not agree on what practices to follow. It is simply a movement of respect and preservation, which encourages the maintenance and transmission of teachings and texts from all lineages that are in danger of being lost. The Jonang texts, for example, were banned in Tibet for over 400 years, especially the works of Dolpopa. When the Chinese invaded and the government of the Gelugpa disappeared, a Nyingma teacher, Dilgo Kyentse Rinpoche, wisely noted that, without the king of Tibet, the ban on Jonang texts was no longer in effect. He oversaw the reprinting of Jonang texts, and encouraged Western academics to translate and publish the works of the Jonang. He certainly did not convert to Jonang Buddhism. He remained a Nyingma all his life, but he was clearly a very strong proponent of the non-sectarian movement.

Being non-sectarian also implies not being aggressive with our views, no matter how correct we think they are. When we come together as Jonangpas, we study the Jonang view, but when we are dealing with people of other views, we stress what we have in common. In my outreach on social media, I am constantly quoting teachers of other lineages; there is a great deal that we agree on. My goal is not to make Jonang converts but to help students find their path. I think it is very important to have the freedom to explore, and after you are committed to a path, you can still look and learn from others. However, when we visit other teachers, we must ask about lineage. We must ask questions and know who we are listening to. If we go to a doctor, we want to be sure they have a degree and a license. There are many teachers today who do not mention their teachers, and that is probably because they did not have any. There are also many self-proclaimed Buddhist teachers who are proudly "former monks." Their claim to authority is that they quit, that they broke their vows, that they disrobed. Does that not seem more like a disqualification? Would we listen to Judas, the "former Apostle" who betrayed Jesus, to learn about Christian doctrine and practice?

The Buddha taught many different methods and approaches for different people with different levels of capacity, maturity, and inclination. The historical Buddha was a world teacher. We have not had one after him, and we will not have another until Maitreya. All other teachers are not world teachers but are teachers within a particular method or system, Lamas. A Lama is an authorized teacher and does not have to be a monk, nor are all monks authorized teachers. Many monks may never formally teach, and most monks are never Lamas.

Because of the cycle of rebirth, we have certain resonance with certain things and not with others. If we hear a teaching that resonates with us, then we approach it. But always be aware of the injunction of the Buddha for everyone, given in the Kalama Sutra:

> *Don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, "This is our teacher."*
>
> *When you know for yourselves that, "These ideas are unskillful; these ideas are blameworthy; these ideas are censured by the wise; these ideas, when adopted and carried out, lead to harm and to suffering" — then you should abandon them.*
>
> *And when you know for yourselves that other ideas are favorable and beneficial, then accept them and practice them.* —Buddha Shakyamuni

The Dharma will eventually disappear from this earth. The Buddha said so, and all our teachers have also said so. But the Buddha also said that things are the way they are, whether there is someone to recognize that reality or not. So, the Truth will not disappear, but eventually the doctrine will disappear. This disappearance is not going to happen in our lifetime or in the lifetime of anyone who is being born

now. It is a long process, and we are seeing it begin to play out. This is the age of the five corruptions, and religious institutions are not immune to these five corruptions of time, beings, views, afflictions, and lifespan.

Right now, our role as Jonang Buddhists is to uphold the non-sectarian movement. Our 400-year persecution was traumatic, and we do not want to go back to that. Today, unlike during the 16th to the 20th centuries, being openly Jonangpa is not a problem, but being sectarian is always a problem, so we are very careful to respect and collaborate with others. The Jonang have never been a mass movement, because our Lamas encourage continued applied effort, not mere nominal adherence. We have always been more interested in the quality of our practice than in the number of our followers. We do not want wealth and influence, and have always held that the union of political power and religious authority leads to corruption and chaos. We have no grandiose plans for world domination… There are those who resonate with our *zhentong* (Other Emptiness) view and our Vajra Yoga practice, and we are here for them.

THIRTY-ONE

I bow to the Lamas who teach that, by the sublime method of the path, what is present as the ground is merely actualized as the result, a stainless Thusness with all stains removed, like the sky free of clouds, dust, smoke, mist, and eclipse.

Whatever legitimate method we follow, and Dolpopa has mentioned many of them in previous verses, the result is always "a stainless Thusness." On the path, there is nothing to fabricate or construct. The journey is always a *dis-covery*, un-covering wrong views, afflicted emotions, and the negative karma that goes with them, as well as a *re-covery* of our natural perfection, our original enlightenment, our Buddha Nature. Whatever "sublime method of the path" we use, the result is always the same. It is "Thusness with all stains removed." Thusness is our Buddha Nature: that which is. Everything else is false. Everything else is illusion. As we have said many times, darkness does not exist. It is not a thing that needs to be rolled up and put away somewhere. We just need to turn on the light, or —more accurately— to turn to the light.

Buddha Nature has always been, and the coverings which obscure it have no substantial existence. Through whatever legitimate method we follow, Buddha Nature becomes manifest. Buddha Nature is the ground or basis. The result is Buddha Nature. Impermanence is an aspect of relative reality, and Buddha Nature is not part of relative reality. It is absolute. It does not grow or change; it is always the same. As Maitreya stated in the *Uttaratantra Shastra,* covered Buddha Nature, we call ordinary being; partially uncovered Buddha Nature, we call Bodhisattva; fully uncovered Buddha Nature, we call Buddha. They are all the same, except for the level of covering.

Dolpopa tells us that "Thusness with all stains removed" is like the sky. Sky in Buddhism is another word for space. This space cannot be contaminated. Space is not a thing. That is why it is a perfect metaphor for Buddha Nature. Space is the absence of obstruction; it is *no-thing.* Yet, we commonly speak of space as being polluted or covered by clouds, dust, mist, smoke, or eclipse, which we understand as an obstruction of space —not seeing through what is standing in the way of our sight. When we describe space as being covered in these ways, we are imputing conditions onto space that space does not have.

How do we know if we are moving towards uncovering Buddha Nature, if we are walking the "sublime method of the path"? It is not mysterious. There are clear signs and symptoms, the progressive removal of the stains of wrong views and afflicted emotions. We do not have to ask anyone how we are doing. If we have begun to replace the wrong view of separation with the right view of non-duality, if we have begun to remove the wrong view of supremacy with the view of the equality and interdependence of all sentient beings, we are moving towards manifesting our Buddha Nature. If we are leaving aside or diminishing attachment, aversion, and indifference, and we notice a spontaneous increase of kindness, compassion, rejoicing in the virtue and happiness of others, and equanimity (not becoming excited when things go well or depressed when they do not, and not making distinctions between friend and enemy), we are moving towards enlightenment. We are moving to whatever degree or at whatever pace is right for us.

On the other hand, if we are full of judgement and hate, we are not moving towards enlightenment. If we are full of pride, we are not moving towards enlightenment. If we are rude and unkind to others, we are not moving towards enlightenment. There are degrees of progress, and we need to be patient with ourselves. It takes time and effort. We have strong tendencies developed through countless experiences and countless lives. Even if we do not accept rebirth, how many times have we been reborn in this lifetime? How many times has our mind changed in this lifetime? How much has our body changed in this lifetime? We all have accumulated experiences that have a direction and a momentum. Sometimes when we get on the expressway, and we have taken the wrong exit, we must drive a long time before

there is an off-ramp. We have long-standing and deeply established tendencies. We may just have to keep going for a while and be carefully looking for the off-ramp. But it is there, and we will find it eventually. That is an aspect of patience. When we speak of patience, we mean patience with ourselves, with the Dharma, and with others.

Our tendency is to want things to be convenient, but we must be willing to put forth some effort. Right Effort is one of the components of the Eightfold Noble Path. Yes, we are tired and busy. But how important is our liberation from suffering? The Dharma does not benefit from our efforts. We benefit from our efforts. Buddhism has no god, so no one needs our worship or sacrifice. Our effort is for our own benefit as practitioners, and ultimately for the benefit of all sentient beings. Are we committed to our own benefit? That is the question that we should ask ourselves.

We are attached to convenience, to ease without effort, and to the causes of suffering. Yesterday I watched some interviews with young men who are addicted to crack cocaine. They clearly knew what the addiction was doing to their lives, but when asked if they wanted to stop, their answer was, "No." There are causes of suffering. Unfortunately, we are very fond of many of them. When we offer a dedication prayer in our lineage we say, "May all be free from suffering and the causes of suffering." These words are not redundant. We must want both to end. Not wanting to be free of the causes of suffering is like wanting to drink too much alcohol, but not wanting the hangover.

We need to recognize that Buddha Nature is there. It is the basis. It is also the path and the result. Knowing that gives us confidence, which is the better rendition of the Sanskrit term *shraddha*, that is usually translated as faith. In Buddhism, *shraddha or* confidence means that we find a teaching reasonable, we practice it, it works, we adopt it, and keep going. Once we realize that everyone has Buddha Nature, confidence is established. Then we make the effort to discover it, to remove the wrong views and afflicted emotions, knowing Buddha Nature is there. It may take a different amount of time and effort for some than for others, but uncovering it is inevitable. One key component in doing that is patience. However, patience is one of the things that is most difficult for us today. We live in an instant culture. We tend to think that spiritual progress should be as instant as all our technology.

Spiritual progress also requires consistency. There are people who have been around the Dharma for decades, but their instruction has been sporadic. In the West, we have wonderful teachers who come, teach, and give empowerments. The light goes on in our heads, but then the teacher is gone, and sooner or later that light fades. People think that because they have been practicing and hearing the Dharma sporadically for years, that they have heard it enough. But how many times each day are we exposed to the opposite of the Dharma? How many times are we exposed to attachment, aversion, and indifference? How many times are we exposed to the wrong views of separation and supremacy? Everyday! All our waking moments! The entire world is in the midst of a hate fest. Even a great teaching, if not repeated and reinforced, is not enough. We need consistent cultivation of the Dharma —as much and as often as possible. Ideally, we should meet consistently with our teachers and have time for questions and answers. Sadly, I understand why that is difficult to accomplish for many, if not most, practitioners.

If we want to have "the sky free of clouds, dust, smoke, mist, and eclipse," we need to start removing those stains, which are the wrong views and afflicted emotions. We cannot do that in a haphazard way. In Buddhism, we talk about two periods of practice: meditation and post-meditation. Both are necessary, but post-meditation is longer and more important. The time when we are not meditating has much more weight in our lives than the time we spend meditating. Most of us, even very serious practitioners, meditate at most a few hours a day. What happens for the other twenty-two or so hours? Even when we are asleep, our minds are working with those established tendencies. Unfortunately, our

dreams are also made of wrong views and afflicted emotions. So, we need to start taking the Dharma seriously.

In post-meditation, we first need to watch our emotions. The problem with our emotions is that, because we are not paying attention, by the time we notice them, we are past the point of no return. All emotions are afflicted, and we need to be attentive and vigilant. We watch for attachment and aversion. When they begin to arise, we take a mental step back. That means separating feeling (pleasant, unpleasant, indeterminate) from emotion: attachment for the pleasant, aversion for the unpleasant, and indifference for the indeterminate. Asking questions like, "Do I have to have it?" "Do I have to destroy it?" "Do I have to criticize?" is an antidote, because it helps to distance us from the emotion.

> *Disliking something does not destroy it and liking something does not assist us in obtaining it. What then is the point of liking or disliking something when doing so cannot safeguard or destroy it?* —Jamgon Mipham

Also, we must get out of the habit of identifying with our emotions. Do not say, "I am angry." Instead, try saying, "There is anger." Rather than thinking, "I am sad or depressed," try saying, "There is sadness." We are not our emotions. Emotions exist, but they are not who we are. In addition, we need to use language mindfully and stop exaggerating. We may be very hungry, but most of us are not "starving." Something may be good, but it is not "awesome" or "fantastic." We do not "love" chocolate or "hate" broccoli. Exaggeration predisposes us to extreme emotions. Language significantly impacts how we think. We can even become addicted to the use of extremes, and we can see that in our political discourse today. Social media has played an important role in unleashing these extremes, so we all need to tone it down. Every person is a part of the problem.

Finally, we need to know that what arises endures briefly and then disappears. In meditation and post-meditation, if a thought arises, and we do not pursue it, it will go away on its own. If an emotion arises, and we do not hold on to it, it will disappear in one-sixtieth of a finger snap. It takes a great deal more effort to become upset than to allow things to pass by. We must watch; we must be vigilant, because we are so used to just jumping right in. As the Buddha said, someone may shoot an arrow into you, but do you want a second arrow as well? The second arrow that we shoot at ourselves can be much more painful than the first one.

It is important to present the Dharma in a consistent, unified manner so that the connections can be made. That is one reason why the *Handbook*, this presentation of the Dharma by Dolpopa, is so essential. We need to organize our Dharma wisdom. We may have a lot of information, but because it has not been provided in a unified manner, it is like a fragmented hard disk. We can make those connections and defragment our minds. The post-meditation period is where we do most of our spiritual training and where we grow. We must hear the Dharma, contemplate, and meditate, but the most important thing is to practice it. Being kind is something that we do. Being compassionate is something that we do. Rejoicing is something that we do. Seeing the equality and interdependence of all sentient beings is something that we do. We can do all these things. It takes some effort, but it takes less effort than continuing down the wrong road that we have been on for so long. That road leads to a crash, but there is a very powerful off-ramp.

We can have our "sky free of clouds, dust, smoke, mist, and eclipse" because we have Buddha Nature, and because Buddha Nature has us. Dharma means, "that which holds." These teachings by Dolpopa are not philosophy. Buddhism is not philosophy. It is always an invitation to practice, to do the uncovering, to use "the sublime method of the path." We all have the same essence, the same nature, the same qualities, and the same capacity as the Buddha Shakyamuni and every other realized individual. Some may be showing them a bit more, but all are the same.

THIRTY-TWO

I bow to the Lamas who teach that the assembly of the non-conceptual primordial awareness of immutable luminosity destroys the sheath of stains on the self-arisen primordial awareness, and that the absolute Truth Form accomplishes excellent benefit for oneself.

As usual in this Handbook, the text begins with recognizing those Lamas who are teaching the pure, definitive Dharma. Dolpopa is defining the Truth Form of the Buddha. Of course, this is a human analysis, and it is for our benefit. The Buddhas are said to have three bodies or forms. They are not meant to constitute any sort of trinity but are simply three different aspects: wisdom, power, and compassion. Often the three bodies are also called the Form of Truth, the Form of Glory, and the Form of Manifestation or activity.

The Truth Form of the Buddha is ultimate reality itself: non-dual, primordial, formless wisdom. This aspect is called the Dharmakaya. There is also the Form of Glory of the Buddha, or the aspect of luminous compassion; this is called the Sambhogakaya. Then there is the aspect of the union of wisdom and compassion in practice, which is called the Nirmanakaya, or the Form of Manifestation. Here Dolpopa is defining the Truth Form, the Dharmakaya. When one attains reality as it is, true emptiness, that Dharmakaya benefits the "individual" who attains enlightenment but does not benefit anyone else. So, there is also the Form of Glory, the Sambhogakaya, which is luminous compassion, and benefits other sentient beings. But not all sentient beings are able to accept that luminous compassion. Therefore, there is the third form of the Buddha, the Nirmamakaya, which unites wisdom and compassion in a way that is accessible to those of us whose karma is very dense.

In the history of humankind, we have all approached Buddhism or the Dharma through the Nirmanakaya, and the most recent Buddha of this form was Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha who manifested wisdom, power, and compassion. This power is not political but true power to liberate. The Buddha was born a prince, and he gave up political power to demonstrate that true power is something very different. The only power that counts is the power to lead others to enlightenment, to help others come to the end of suffering. The Nirmanakaya is of benefit to others, but not a benefit to the Buddha himself. After his enlightenment, the Buddha considered not teaching others about the path. This momentary consideration was a skillful means to instruct us about the kindness and compassion of the Buddha. When we attain enlightenment, we will see that we do not *need* anything. We do not need a following or fame or wealth or anything. Therefore, anything an enlightened being does after enlightenment is done purely out of compassion.

We, then, approach the Buddha through the Nirmanakaya, the Manifest Form of Compassion. However, there are those rare individuals who are so advanced on the path that they can derive benefit from the Sambhogakaya, the Form of Glory. There are some who cultivate meditation to such a point that they do not necessarily need to interact with an embodied teacher; they can access the non-physical manifestation of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The Truth Form, the Dharmakaya, of which Dolpopa speaks here, can benefit only a fully realized Buddha, because at that point, there is no separation, no subject-object duality, no self and other.

Dolpopa tries for our sake to explain the Dharmakaya, the Truth Form. That is not easy because, in our present state, we have no access to it whatsoever, which explains why the terminology here is so abstruse. That terminology is a reminder that this form is beyond ordinary understanding. By the complexity of the composition, Dolpopa tells us that the Dharmakaya is not truly accessible to the ordinary mind. So, we really cannot comprehend it, but let us look at what he says anyway.

There are two assemblies that, through our practice, we are accumulating or cultivating: the accumulation of wisdom and the accumulation of merit. Dolpopa refers to the accumulation of wisdom when he says: "the assembly of the non-conceptual primordial awareness." Non-conceptual simply means it cannot be defined with concepts. There is no human mental category for this wisdom. We have a human mental category for knowledge, but we do not have a human mental category for this type of wisdom. We have some measure of wisdom, but when we try to communicate it, we make it less than it is. For example, when we have a clear insight and try to explain it to someone else, something is always lost. The knowledge that we can communicate is always less than the wisdom we may experience. That is why Dolpopa uses the term "non-conceptual." Primordial awareness refers to the fact that this is not a glimpse of wisdom but seeing beyond appearances. Primordial literally means, "before there is order." Once we enter into the sphere of order, we enter into the spheres of time and categories, but primordial is prior to time, sequence, and characteristics. That is the kind of awareness Dolpopa is mentioning here.

What is this primordial awareness? It is an awareness of "immutable luminosity." Immutable means that it never changes, and luminosity means that there is no obstruction to that wisdom. Right now, how many obstructions do we have to simple knowledge, let alone wisdom? Dolpopa gives an incredibly precise definition in words, which is all we have to communicate. He says that what the fully awakened Buddhas have cultivated is a primordial awareness: a non-temporal, direct, clear, vision of reality. What does this primordial wisdom do for that individual? It destroys the covering of stains, which are of two kinds: wrong views and afflicted emotions. When one destroys wrong views, afflicted emotions are also destroyed, because they arise from wrong views. Once one has this penetrating insight, this piercing clarity, this primordial awareness, the "stains on self-arisen primordial awareness" are destroyed simultaneously. There is nothing to impede vision. From our perspective, which is not primordial, things happen in sequence, but from the perspective of the Buddha, there is no time or sequence.

"The absolute Truth Form accomplishes excellent benefit for oneself." As we said before, this form benefits the Buddha. It does not benefit anyone else. That is why in other texts Dolpopa explains the Sambhogakaya and Nirmanakaya forms of the Buddha that provide benefit for others. Now this apparently incomprehensible statement becomes clearer. It is basically a definition of unobstructed vision. The Buddhas have an unobstructed, unimpeded, unlimited vision of reality. This is a description of the Buddha's enlightenment. The other two forms, the Sambhogakaya and the Nirmanakaya, make liberation available to others.

For us ordinary beings, the wrong views of separation and supremacy are innate, which means they are not part of our nature but are the basis of this karma: this human body and mind. Because of the nature of the human body and mind, we always refer everything to ourselves. First, we must become aware that we are doing that. Most people just simply assume that is the way it is: the world revolves around *me*! We strive for enlightenment on the Buddhist path because we cannot go out to help others when our heart-mind is full of affliction. We have seen this in the history of humankind. How many missionaries have been the vanguard of imperialists and colonizers? There is a famous Native American saying: "When the missionaries came, we had the land and they had the Bible. Then they told us to close our eyes to pray, and when we opened our eyes again, we had the Bible and they had the land."

When our heart is filled with attachment and aversion, we cannot truly benefit anyone. Therefore, our personal spiritual cultivation must come first. We come together, we meditate, we study, we say prayers, and we do mind training because, without those things, we cannot help anyone. Even while we are doing that, we should always think that this practice is for the benefit of all. Intention is all-important. If I practice just for my own liberation, I will not attain enlightenment. To attain enlightenment, we must stop viewing duality. As long as we think, "I am separate from others, and

therefore I can liberate just myself," we are stuck in wrong view, which is the opposite of enlightenment. Spiritual cultivation will make us better able to help others.

Liberation means that we have removed the afflicted emotions, and enlightenment means that we have removed the veil of wrong views. Buddhas have perfect, complete enlightenment and Bodhisattvas have liberation, they do not suffer. Enlightenment includes liberation, but liberation does not include enlightenment. Unless one is a supreme Nirmanakaya Buddha, it is not possible to act in the world with a completely unobstructed vision, because in that state one would not see suffering. Suffering is not visible to perfect wisdom because suffering is false. From the absolute perspective, there is no one who suffers. So, the Bodhisattvas voluntarily accept limitations to wisdom and to liberation in order to help us. Otherwise, they could not act in this conventional, relative reality.

The next Nirmanakaya Buddha who will appear in this world is Maitreya, but He will not come for another eight to ten thousand years. We will not have another fully enlightened Buddha who chooses to share this world with us for that long. It is extremely rare. It is not that the other Buddhas are selfish, but that it is rare to have that degree of power. Remember, we spoke about wisdom, which is emptiness, and compassion, which is luminosity. There is also power. It takes unimaginable power for a Buddha to do what Shakyamuni did, to be a Buddha in this world. The Buddha Shakyamuni was a fully enlightened being, and he chose to make samsara His sphere of action. There are many sutras in which other Buddhas appear and praise Him for His willingness to do that. In this world, he became voluntarily subject to aging, illness, and death, but not to attachment, aversion, and indifference, or to separation and supremacy.

Right now, we are cultivating wisdom and compassion. Why do we have to cultivate both? We cultivate wisdom for our own sake. We cultivate compassion for the sake of all. We cultivate the union of wisdom and compassion to be able to rescue every sentient being. That is the definition of power.

Some people have the view that the Dharmakaya is supreme, and the Dharmakaya is indeed wonderful. All aspects of the Buddha are wonderful, but the Nirmanakaya is supreme because it is the manifest Buddha that is helpful to all beings. The glorious Sambhogakaya Buddhas are helpful, but only for those who are perceptive enough. The Sambhogakayas are only accessible to advanced practitioners who can see Them. But the Nirmanakaya Buddhas are accessible to all, even though not all will accept Them. In the sutras, we see the Buddha interacting with mass murderers and turning them around with a mere word. That is the power of the Buddha. That is the power of the union of wisdom and compassion. The Dharmakaya and Sambhogakaya Buddhas cannot do that. The Dharmakaya Buddhas are invisible to all. The Sambhogakaya Buddhas are invisible to most. The Nirmanakaya Buddhas are visible to all.

In the text we are discussing, Dolpopa explains the Truth Form, the Dharmakaya, which is the primordial, unimpeded, unobstructed, non-conceptual, non-temporal wisdom of reality as it is. In the next text, he will explain that from wisdom comes great love. Love is the desire that all be happy, and that desire is directed to those wandering in samsara without understanding. Great love is the motivation for the assembly or accumulation of merit, which is gathered through acts of compassion. It is those acts which accomplish benefit and happiness, even on a relative level. It is that accumulation of merit that produces both the Sambhogakaya and the Nirmanakaya forms of the Buddha. Without love, it is just wisdom. Wisdom combined with love produces compassion and power.

We could say, to make this simpler, that the three aspects of the Buddha are wisdom, compassion, and power —not power *over* but power *with*. This also refers to our own Buddha Nature, which never changes, has pure vision, excellent compassion, and all power. Right now, it is covered, but it is all there. Another classical image of our covered Buddha Nature is of a very poor person who lives her entire life in a hut that is built over a vast treasure.

The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are always needed because samsara never ends. We can get out, but samsara will continue. As long as there is karma, there will be places like this. Progress is an illusion. Look at the quality of the people that we consider leaders. Things are going down fast. There is a myth of progress. We need to understand that technology is not progress and the addition of technology to make us superior, trans-human cyborgs is not a way forward. Our evidence for progress is that we now have the capacity to destroy the world, and we are doing it. We are not moving forward, and we need to stop identifying technology with progress. It is a sign and a symptom of devolution. I taught for seventeen years in medical school and I saw such a decline in my students. They became less and less competent. Although they had more technology, many did not know how to relate to patients. Let us be very careful what we buy into.

Ultimately, we are dealing with a cycle that starts with rebirth, and continues with aging, disease, and death. Within samsara, those four are inevitable. They may take different shapes, forms, and timelines, but they are unavoidable. The only way to be truly trans-human, beyond human limitations, is not through technology, but by attaining perfect, complete enlightenment, which is "the assembly of non-conceptual primordial awareness of immutable luminosity." That phrase could make a great bumper sticker, if only it would fit...

Let us remember, the Buddhas have wisdom, power, and compassion. If we do not understand anything else, let us understand this. Let us go for all three. We and everybody else need all three. From wisdom comes true compassion and from true compassion comes power. We ordinary beings cultivate wisdom and compassion simultaneously, but in terms of Buddha forms, it begins with wisdom. The compassion of which we are capable is not true compassion. It can be a good approximation, but the uncontaminated love that comes from true wisdom is only possible for a Buddha. When we see no difference between "me" and "other," then caring for myself is caring for everyone else. When we love everyone, we so strongly want to help that we develop the power to do so, we become perfectly enlightened Buddhas.

> *When watching after yourself, you watch after others.*
> *When watching after others, you watch after yourself.*
> —Buddha Shakyamuni

THIRTY-THREE

I bow to the Lamas who teach that a special feeling of great love for those wandering without understanding creates the accumulation of merit that accomplishes benefit and happiness, fully produces the excellent, relative forms and accomplishes excellent benefit for others.

This is a very profound teaching. Love is the desire that others be happy. What is that special feeling of great love? That is *bodhicitta***,** the mind of enlightenment, and it is specifically directed at those wandering without understanding or those caught in the cycle of birth, disease, decay, and death. Who is worthy of our love? We have the idea that it has to do with the qualities of the love object, but that is self-interest, not love. Loving people who are good and kind to us is easy. Our love should be directed at those who are suffering, who have no happiness. However, we tend to do the opposite. In our everyday lives, we love those who are good and dislike those who are caught up in ignorance. However, those caught in suffering are those who need our love. They are the ones who are "wandering without understanding." The Buddhas and the Great Bodhisattvas are already happy, so there is no need to wish for their happiness. We can respect and learn from them, but the ones who need our love and compassion are those who are in the grasp of ignorance. That includes us as well.

If we find ourselves understanding more than we used to, or more than some others may understand, that should not make us feel superior. Instead, we should feel greater love and compassion for those who are where we once were. We are not talking about human romantic love or other types of human love, but something deeper. Bodhicitta is the kind of love which Buddhism presents as similar to, but even greater than, the love of a mother for her child. Very often, mothers who have many children will have special affection for the ones who do less well. I once worked with a program for children with disabilities in a health center. The mothers were a big part of designing it, and we asked them to name the program. They chose the name, *Los más queridos* (The Most Loved). Many of these mothers had so-called normal children as well, but they came up with this name to express a truth about their children with disabilities. They *needed* more love! Likewise, Dolpopa asks us: who is worthier of love than those lost or wandering? They are not wandering through a nice situation. They are wandering in hatred, in suffering, in greed, in miserliness, in fear, in helplessness, in jealousy, in pride, in lust. None of these are nice things to experience. Even pride is often a compensation for a feeling of lack of self-worth. All are extreme forms of suffering, and those suffering in this way are most worthy, most in need of our love.

It is precisely a feeling of great love that "creates the accumulation of merit." To attain enlightenment, we need two accumulations: merit and wisdom. This text deals with the accumulation of merit, but it is not possible to do so without simultaneously accumulating wisdom. Wisdom is understanding emptiness, which is not a vacancy but the lack of subject-object duality. Sadly, we do not have a better term in English, because emptiness does not mean a vacuum, an absolute nothingness. It means that we are the ones perceiving ourselves as subjects and other beings, things, and situations as subjects. If we do not understand this, wisdom is very far.

> *The definition of emptiness is the non-existence of subject-object duality and the existence of that non-existence. Thusness, the limit of the real, the signless, the nature of the ultimate, and the ground of phenomena are, succinctly, the synonyms of emptiness.* —Maitreya, Madhyantavibhaga

All the qualities that we see in things and people are not intrinsic to them; they are our projections. This understanding is wisdom. What we think is good and bad has to do with our judgement. What we think is pretty or ugly or delicious or disgusting depends entirely upon us. Those qualities are not inherent in the person or the thing or the situation. If they were, everyone would have exactly the same reaction to everything.

It is wise to recognize that things are not as we see them and that how they appear is based on our sensory limitations, emotional distortions, and conceptual bias. Everything we perceive is based on our previous experience. Some of it may be more or less accurate, but that is beside the point. Those three conditions determine how we perceive the world and the sentient beings in it. We do not see or hear everything. Our emotional distortions, our feelings, dramatically change our perceptions, and our conceptual categories determine what we can and cannot see. Recently several articles have been published concerning the color blue, stating that in most cultures that have been studied, the color blue did not exist until (historically) recently. The word for blue is the last color name to appear in most languages. The question is, before having the word, did people see blue? The ancient Greeks spoke of the *"wine-dark sea" (oînops póntoss).* Tibetans call green what we see as dark blue, because colors also are a conceptual category, a label. There is speculation that because we humans inhabited the outdoors surrounded by blue sky, we did not think of its qualities. Do fish know they are in water? Only after living in enclosed spaces and going out, did humans remark on the blueness of the sky. We only notice things when they are lacking. This is just one example of how our conceptual categories determine what we notice and do not notice.

The true understanding of emptiness —the lack of inherent characteristics— is that we project characteristics, not that there is nothing out there. We understand that what is out there is not as we perceive it. This is wisdom, knowing all phenomena are insubstantial, impermanent, and dependent. The more we develop a direct experience of emptiness, the wiser we are. All ignorance comes from imputing qualities and believing them to be real. We also impute qualities to ourselves, like separate existence, which is the root of all problems.

In this text, Dolpopa speaks of the accumulation of merit. If we have the accumulation of wisdom but not the accumulation of merit, there is no enlightenment. It is "the accumulation of merit that accomplishes benefit and happiness" for us and for others. "It produces the excellent relative forms." We have already explained that the Buddhas, the enlightened ones, have a Truth Form, which is insubstantial. It is just truth. But they also have relative forms: the Form of Glory and the Form of Compassion. It is this accumulation of merit, this great love, that gives rise to the relative forms.

The two "excellent relative forms" are the physical forms that we ordinary humans seem to need most, and the mental forms, which are aspects of our own Buddha Nature. We give a mental form to a quality of our own Buddha Nature. Because we are non-different from the Buddhas, we also have the same qualities, and by invoking those Forms of Glory, we can recognize them in ourselves. We can have a relationship with those aspects. They are helpful representations for us to have some basis for that process. The relative forms give us a basis for aspiration. The human mind works in images. How do we remember a person whom we love? Over time, we may find it difficult to remember that person without an image. If we want to strengthen an aspect of our own personality, we also think of a form, a model. If we want to be more professional, for example, there are things that we do to cultivate that, following some model. If we want to be trendier, there are things we cultivate, following some model.

Our prayers are directed at aspects of our own Buddha Nature —not because we believe they are hanging out there somewhere— but because they are within us. They are not *them*. They are *us*. Our own Buddha Nature has many aspects, just as we ordinary humans have different aspects. We can be a parent, and a child, and a boss, and an employee, and a student, and a teacher, and a sibling, and a stranger, and a friend. We have as many aspects as there are people who look at us, and we recognize our many aspects and choose which ones to bring forth. When we go into the work environment, we do not bring out our bedroom aspect, and visa-versa. We choose which aspect to manifest. Buddhism is about skillful means to train the mind. So, these relative forms are very useful, and that is why Dolpopa calls them "excellent relative forms."

These forms are relative to individual people and cultures. According to our needs and present condition, we perceive the Buddhas in three ways. The grossest perception is to only see that which is physically apparent: images of the physical body of a Buddha or Bodhisattva. The Buddha Shakyamuni, for example, passed away a long time ago. Those who lived at the time of the Buddha saw Him in His physical form. What forms of that Buddha do we keep? What forms of that Buddha are with us? The Truth Form is with us, but is invisible. To perceive the Form of Glory or Power requires an elevation of the mind. However, the relative forms of the many representations of the Buddha are available to ordinary perception.

Many of the original followers of the Buddha were monastics who had no permanent dwellings. Therefore, what originated as a physical remembrance of the Buddha was the stupa. The original stupa was a monastic robe folded into a square with an inverted begging bowl on top. That was the simple representation of the Buddha, which He gave to his followers as a means of remembrance of Him and of any monk that had attained enlightenment. However, as Buddhism encountered other cultures, things changed. The Buddha preached throughout the Indian subcontinent, where there existed a fantastic proliferation of gods and their images. In that environment and in other cultures where people had no knowledge of what the Buddha looked like, the need to represent the Buddha grew and became culturally conditioned. In Korea, the Buddhas look Korean, Chinese Buddhas look Chinese, Gandharan Buddhas look Greek, Japanese Buddhas look Japanese, Tibetan Buddhas look Tibetan. We have a need to represent in images, and we do it according to culture. The Buddha always taught us to consider time, place, and circumstance, so the various representations are not a departure from His teachings. There are some Buddhist sects that reject all forms of representation, and yet, they also have symbols. The *enzo*, a circle drawn in one stroke, is one. There is a Korean Buddhist sect, the Won, that only have a golden circle in their temples. It is difficult to deny human nature. That is why even religions that are aniconic end up making representations. For example, in Islam, one cannot represent Allah or the Prophet Mohammed, but their splendid calligraphy is a form of representation. In Christianity, there was a strong movement against icons during the 8th century, but even the iconoclasts used crosses as symbols.

These relative forms “accomplish excellent benefit for others.” Full enlightenment is to accomplish the Truth Form, to be awake to our own Buddha Nature. Those sentient beings who attain enlightenment and have cultivated the accumulation of merit, develop relative forms. There are sentient beings who have attained enlightenment or partial enlightenment, but because they have not cultivated merit, we do not know about them, nor are they helpful to us. The ones who have cultivated merit through great love are helpful to us. What would have happened if the Buddha never taught? He would have His Truth Form, but no relative forms, and we would never have known about Him. If Jesus did not preach and decided to just be a carpenter, He still could have had his own inner life, but no relative forms in the Buddhist sense. We would not have known of Him physically, and we would not have these aspects of Jesus to call on. These excellent relative forms embody our true qualities, and that is the beauty of the awakened ones. They embody our qualities, not their qualities. When we see them, we can know what we truly are. Isn’t that amazing? When we see them with either the inner or the outer eye, we see ourselves. When we see the relative form of a Bodhisattva, we are seeing ourselves. He or she was able to manifest these qualities, and so can we.

Buddhist altars are mirrors for us to look at ourselves. This is the real us. Look and understand that we are non-different. When we look at some of these forms of glory or power, like the image of Tara, and understand what She stands for, we see that our own Buddha Nature is always ready to stand up at any moment to protect our practice. She also has plenty of arms to do it with. When we look at the different

representations, whether we look at them in our minds or outwardly in a physical form, they are meant to remind us that we have the same qualities and capacities, and they are available on demand.

We are sentient beings, and therefore our identification with non-sentient entities is less complete than our identification with other sentient beings. In our present state, we can identify more fully with a sentient being than with a non-sentient object. As much as I may love a view in nature, I will never become the sun or the tree. Nature is beautiful and inspiring, but the level of identification is not the same. It is very difficult to sustain faith without a human or at least sentient form with which practitioners can identify. The first alleged monotheistic faith in human history attempted to replace all Egyptian gods with the sun disk. It failed, because people just could not buy into that image. The beauty of Buddhism is that it does not deny human nature but uses it to help us see things as they are.

“These relative forms accomplish excellent benefit for others.” Once we attain enlightenment, we become an example for others, a way, a form. All religions venerate their saints, who are simply the relative forms. We can see them and understand that we are not that different from them and be inspired. The more there are, the more we are liable to find one with whom we particularly identify.

In this text, Dolpopa speaks of great love, which goes beyond altruism and empathy and even compassion. Love is the unlimited desire for the happiness of all. There is nothing higher than that. When we end our aspiration prayers, we do the heart opening mudra (separating our joint hands, palms facing forward) which tells our minds to open the heart to all beings. The whole world fits in our heart, the whole world and all sentient beings. Don’t keep it so narrow. Open it up for all sentient beings, especially for those wandering without understanding, for those who are suffering. That is great love.

THIRTY-FOUR

I bow to you who teach that after fully perfecting a sea of prayers, fully maturing a sea of sentient beings, and fully purifying a sea of Buddha lands, one dissolves into the culmination of perfection.

This statement offers us the quintessential view of the Mahayana, the Universal Vehicle. In the Hinayana, the Individual Vehicle, which is the dominant form of Buddhism today in many countries, the goal is to attain nirvana individually, on our own. Practice is a means to attain our own liberation, and the belief is that the best a practitioner can do for others is to be an example. However, the Mahayana is based on the view that there is no separation among all sentient beings and teaches that unless all are free of suffering and the causes of suffering, individual liberation is merely a temporary illusion. The view of the Individual Vehicle is like the idea of attaining a heavenly life while others still suffer, and some are in hell. Even the temporary nirvana of Buddhism, however, is superior to a life of pleasure in heaven, because the aggregates of form, sensation, perception, formations, and consciousness do not exist in temporary nirvana. Yet, when the causes of individual liberation are exhausted, that mindstream in temporary nirvana will return to samsara. In the Mahayana, we have always understood that true liberation is universal liberation; true enlightenment is universal enlightenment.

"After fully perfecting a sea of prayers," refers to training the mind to understand reality. The purpose of prayer is to train our minds, and this is a fundamental point that many people miss. We are not praying to Tara or Vajrasattva or the Buddha Shakyamuni. We are reciting prayers and mantras to transform our own minds. Repetition is the key to transformation, in both positive and negative directions. Why do we remember ads and jingles for things that we don't even like? The answer is that we have heard them over and over. Why do politicians repeat the same thing at every stump stop? They have speech-writers that could easily come up with another spiel, but they want to say the same thing over and over because that is how they mold the minds of others. Therefore, prayer is a skillful means to change our minds in a very positive way. We need to change our minds about the two fundamental wrong views: that we are independent, separate beings and that we are more important than any others. To perfect "a sea of prayers" is to attain Right View, which means to transform the mind to eliminate wrong views.

What does it mean to "fully mature a sea of sentient beings"? The Buddha often referred to us, who live mostly in illusion, as children. He did not mean this in a pejorative way, but in the sense that children have a great deal to learn. To mature sentient beings means to dedicate ourselves to helping others understand the Dharma, which means developing kindness and compassion. Helping others is the "do good" part of the Buddha's summary of the Dharma: "Avoid harm, do good, purify the mind." To purify "a sea of Buddha lands" is the purification part. Buddha lands are Realms of action. Where we live is mostly, if not fully, in our minds. Our experience of the external world is internal. So, to purify "a sea of Buddha lands" means to cleanse our view and our experience of the world so that we reside in an awakened state of mind. Buddha lands are not places; they are Realms of enlightened activity.

If one ceases harm by "perfecting a sea of prayers," does good by "maturing a sea of sentient beings," and purifies the mind by "purifying a sea of Buddha lands," then one "dissolves into the culmination of perfection." What dissolves is not one's true being, but one's view of a separate self. In terms of view and of experience, this means that one ceases to perceive subject/object duality. It is no longer a question of taming the mind, but a spontaneous realization of non-duality, the spontaneous avoidance of harm, and the spontaneous and non-referential doing of good. Spontaneous means that we are no longer in training. When we begin to practice the Dharma, we must put forth effort to restrain our negative tendencies, but after practicing for a while, goodness becomes the norm. For example, when we change our diet, in the beginning it is difficult. But if we stick to it, eventually it becomes the new normal, and we don't even think about it. In Buddhism, the new normal on a higher level is to be

spontaneous. All our good qualities become, not something that we aspire to or that we are conceptually trying to develop, but the spontaneous, natural way in which we act.

Right now, we make choices. We may decide that certain persons or beings are deserving of our compassion, and certain others are not. We make these choices because our kindness and compassion are referential or conditional. But non-referential compassion and the enlightened qualities are totally spontaneous. There is no decision to make, no judgement involved. There is only compassion, kindness, and rejoicing in the virtue of all. Radical, universal compassion is the spontaneous, non-referential reality of the awakened ones. That is what Dolpopa means when he says, "One dissolves into the culmination of perfection."

Some misunderstand Dolpopa's meaning here, thinking that one ceases to be. However, we were never a separate being in the first place, and what never had an origin can never have an end. The fixation on the separate self is exactly like a dream, and that is why the Buddha is called awakened: one who has roused himself from a dream. Therefore, we can think of this dissolution like the way that a dream dissolves. What dissolves is the view of the "I", the separate self. It "dissolves into the culmination of perfection," into full, perfect enlightenment.

To allow this to happen, we must exert some effort, because our training in separation is so pervasive. We have all discovered many things to be false that we were told were true. A way of believing and acting is thrust upon us by our culture. Our gender roles are assigned and accepted for the most part. Our religion is imposed on us at birth. There is imposition after imposition, and if we are good girls and boys, we accept what we are told. This cultural acceptance is why Right View is critical. Right View precedes wisdom and is still conceptual. With Right View, we do not have the direct experience, but we begin to understand that the cultural narrative is not true. It is important to examine how others view the world. In Buddhism, we present the view taught by the Buddha and ask if it meets the test of our reason and our experience. That is how we begin to develop Right View. Dolpopa bows to those who teach that we need to fully perfect "a sea of prayers." He refers to having fully developed Right View. Eventually that view becomes wisdom. To have a view is to see through the eyes of another, and to have wisdom is to see through our own eyes. Both are necessary. That progression is how we learn, just as we did when we were children.

From the viewpoint of full awakening, we are all children who have immature views and are conditioned by attachment, aversion, and indifference. Right View allows us to see our conditioning. It allows us to examine our thoughts and actions to see if they are coming from our afflicted tendencies. It seems to be a stock phrase to say, "I can't help myself." But if we cannot help ourselves, no one else can. Right View gives us some information about what is happening in our minds and how to stop it. It also requires that we accept Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Conduct, and Right Livelihood. We also encounter the next component, Right Effort. No one likes effort, and we wish that it were not necessary. But the effort is made much lighter by the reality of our Buddha Nature.

My Lama used to say, "Relax into perfection." Relaxing means to let go of these wrong views and tendencies that never helped at all. When we hold on to a burning coal, relaxing our hand is a good idea. There is a song of Milarepa that develops this idea beautifully:

> *For generosity, nothing to do,*
> *other than cease fixating on self.*
> *For morality, nothing to do,*
> *other than cease being dishonest.*
> *For patience, nothing to do,*
> *other than not fear what is ultimately true.*

For effort, nothing to do,
other than practice continuously.
For concentration, nothing to do,
other than rest in pure presence.
For discernment, nothing to do,
other than know things directly as they are.

The result of our effort is Right Mindfulness, which means to remember. *Smriti,* the Sanskrit word routinely mistranslated as mindfulness, means remembrance, recollection. What we are to remember are all the components of the Eightfold Path. Once our life begins to get a bit easier through the practice of the Dharma, we may think it is fine to forget those basics of the path. We may think we are so good and special because things are going well, but mindfulness is there to remind us to maintain vigilance.

Every aspect of Jonang meditation practice is meant to strengthen our mindfulness and train the mind. This training begins from the moment we say the opening aspiration prayer. The Dalai Lama has joked that the best "meditation" is sleep, because he knows that so many people mistakenly think of meditation as simply rest. However, meditation is training to have stability of the body, to have free flow of the breath (energy), to have one-pointedness of the mind. It is training to be able to place the mind where we want it and remove it from where we do not want it. That whole process is meditation, and all of it is designed to prepare us for the final part where we rest in the empty luminosity.

The Eightfold Noble Path reminds us of the importance of process at every point. In fact, it tells us that without all other components of the path, there is no possibility of concentration or meditation. It is a wheel and not a stairway. It does not end with Right Concentration. What comes from Right Concentration is a clearer, deeper understanding of Right View. The path is a spiral that keeps expanding upward and outward. When we have Right View, we begin to apply it more intentionally as we move forward, and we spread that view to our practice of Right Intention, Right Speech, and Right Conduct, and over a broader part of our life.

It is important to maintain consistency on the path because we tend to drop off, like losing weight on a diet and then gaining it all back over the following months. I have met many people who say they used to meditate and gained great benefit, but they do not do it anymore. This dropping off happens in part because we are looking for the experience of meditation rather than seeing meditation for what it is. Meditation is training for post-meditation; it is training for life. It is not an end in itself. In fact, anyone who takes up meditation as an end in itself will eventually give it up, because other things are much more fun. When Dolpopa emphasizes the ideas of maturing and perfecting in this text, he is warning us not to stop avoiding harm, doing good, and purifying the mind. These are not goals that we can accomplish by practicing now and then. In our culture, we have been trained to think that religion is something that we do on Sunday morning, and the rest of the time we are religion-free. However, in Buddhism we are constantly asked to look at our own attachment, aversion, and indifference.

Dolpopa was born in Nepal and lived most of his life in Tibet, so his idea of the sea was vast. To a landlocked person, the sea is inconceivably large. It is like the sky, unending. He very clearly encourages us here to be diligent in our daily practice, in meditation and in post-meditation. To "fully perfect a sea of prayers," is to avoid harm and retrain the mind. To "fully mature a sea of sentient beings," is to do good and practice Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Conduct and Right Livelihood. To "fully purify a sea of Buddha lands," is to fully sterilize the mind of wrong views and afflicted emotions. We cannot purify the mind if we continue to do harm and avoid doing good. It is not possible, because we will remain stuck in our habitual patterns, which will not allow us to think differently.

We need to train ourselves with diligence, and the first thing is to avoid harm. In case we do not understand how to do that, we are given the Five Precepts: do not kill, steal, deceive, abuse the bodies of others, or become intoxicated to the point where we do any of the above. Doing good is explained by the Buddha as the practice of such virtues as generosity, ethical conduct, patience, effort, concentration, and discernment. We are also told how to purify the mind: where there was the view of separation, let there be non-dual wisdom. Where there was the view of supremacy, cultivate the wisdom of equality and interdependence.

The Dharma is not complicated. We make it difficult because we are always looking for loopholes, including assuming it is too complicated. It does take effort, but once we have the Right View of how much going against the Dharma causes us to suffer, then it becomes easier to put forth that effort. Everything in this world takes effort, so are we going to do that which brings benefit or continue to do that which causes and increases suffering? We will be expending effort either way. Here Dolpopa implores us with folded hands to listen and see if the Dharma is something we would like to try. We need to come to the realization that these teachings and practices are for our benefit. These verses of The Handbook help us live our day-to-day ordinary lives. They are not just for Sunday morning.

THIRTY-FIVE

I bow to you who teach that, because of prior impetus, benefit to others will spontaneously occur in all directions, at all times, without effort and thought.

The previous text expressed the reality of benefit to ourselves when we become liberated or enlightened. Dolpopa says that after becoming fully enlightened, we "dissolve into the culmination of perfection." This does not mean that we cease to exist but that we cease to be separate "selves." Enlightenment completely eradicates the wrong views of separation and supremacy, which are the source of all suffering. That is personal or individual benefit. In this text, Dolpopa speaks about the other side of enlightenment, which is that we have a trajectory as Bodhisattvas, as beings on the path of pursuing an awakened mind.

In our present condition as ordinary beings, we have limited capacity and are tied to time, place, and circumstance. Therefore, we have a sphere of action that is characterized by our environment. Because of our time, place, and circumstance, we have a family, language, culture, and interests. Bodhisattvas are not completely exempt from that particularity. Within that particularity, all Bodhisattvas develop a field of action characterized by radical, universal compassion. Even though that compassion is universal, it will express itself in a particular way. We may feel universal compassion, but we are not able, at this time, to manifest it universally. If we feel universal love, we will express it towards those beings in our proximity and in the environment around us.

Based on previous experiences, those on the path of enlightenment develop a particular trajectory. Tara is a good example. She is a female Buddha. As a Bodhisattva, she was in a female body, and the trajectory that she developed was to attain enlightenment in that female body. When Tara was a human being like us, there were almost no opportunities for women. For a woman to attain enlightenment was considered rare, or even impossible, in that extremely patriarchal society. Therefore, she took a vow to remain always in a female form, and that became her trajectory. Another example is a Bodhisattva called Kshitigarbha (Jizo in Japan) who developed a special affinity for travelers, small children, and women in childbirth. That is because of his circumstances a long time ago, the details of which we do not really know. Vajrasattva is called the priest of the Buddhas because of his affinity for conferring purification and comfort. That is His sphere of action, which began when He was a Bodhisattva, to provide comfort and allow others to feel purified. As the Bodhisattvas attain higher levels, they still maintain their particular sphere of action.

If they have a specific trajectory, how can the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas benefit all beings spontaneously "in all directions, at all times, without effort and thought"? It is possible because there is no separation. There are so many places to help and causes to take on, we can feel totally overwhelmed. But what Dolpopa says here is that we do not have to do it all. If we dedicate ourselves to improving that which is in our natural trajectory, we are doing what is necessary to spontaneously benefit every sentient being in all directions. Because there is no separation, if we have improved even one aspect of totality, we have improved all of it. There is no contradiction. We have a specific thing to do, but that specific thing helps everyone everywhere. It benefits all, even those who are not directly within our sphere of action.

A simple example of this truth is that if we work in a large organization and do our work well, we are making it easier for everyone else. On the contrary, if someone does very poor work in some small corner, it will eventually affect everybody. If we improve an aspect of totality, we benefit the whole of totality. With the exception of monastics, if we are getting paid for the good we are doing, that does not diminish the benefit to others. If it weren't for those lay people who are paid for their work, monks and

nuns could not survive. Monks and nuns are necessary, but the working lay community is absolutely essential.

How is it possible for benefit to occur not only spontaneously but "at all times"? We must understand that time is a human construct. We are not even sure if other sentient beings have a concept of time. It is, as far as we know, a particularly human idea. No other animal has an historical view —at least, we speculate that they do not. When you benefit some sentient beings, all are being benefited, not just now but at all times. We should never feel impotent. The real teaching of this passage is about us, you and me. When we can do even a little bit of good for any sentient being, we are doing a whole lot of good for innumerable sentient beings, past, present, and future. That fact can give us a great deal of motivation and lift the burden of impotence. We may feel overwhelmed at so much harm and oppression, but we are benefiting all sentient beings, at all times, and in all places with any beneficial action that we do.

In the case of someone who has attained full enlightenment, the benefit is totally spontaneous and takes no effort. For those of us on the path, it takes thought and effort to benefit others. However, as we become fully enlightened, spontaneous benefit will manifest because it is our nature. We do not have to think about breathing, or blinking, or making our heart beat. Those are spontaneous activities. As we become more and more enlightened, our enlightened activity becomes more and more spontaneous and non-referential. That means that we will not choose the recipients of our kindness in the way that we do now. For the Buddhas, suffering is suffering, and there is no discrimination about the recipients of love and compassion. This state of total non-discrimination we call the Wisdom of Equality. This wisdom is to see all sentient beings as equal to us and to each other —equal in their worth and in our love for them. Once we acknowledge that others are non-different, we can love them all. Now we love those who are close to us because we acknowledge that they are part of us, and their presence makes our life better. In the Wisdom of Equality of the Buddhas, that is how they see all sentient beings.

Equanimity is a quality that allows us to develop the Wisdom of Equality. Equanimity is another word for meditation or a better translation of the Sanskrit word, *samadhi.* The last component of the Eightfold Noble Path is Right Concentration, *samyak samadhi,* which means, to remain even. If we remain even for a long time, then we develop the Wisdom of Equality, because what impedes that wisdom is the lack of equanimity. Meditation is not only what we do on the cushion. That is *practice* for meditation. The fruit of that practice is equanimity. Unfortunately, some have the idea that *samadhi* is a state where we float in space and emit light rays, but it does not mean that at all. *Sama* means equal, and *dhi* means holding, so the meaning is to hold evenly or equally. That is not something to be done fifteen or twenty or thirty minutes a day, or even twice a day for an hour. It is a constant and fundamental part of the path to cultivate equanimity. Meditation practice helps us to do that, but that is not the totality of meditation. Can you imagine practicing how to bake bread but never baking it, or practicing how to write but never writing? We practice meditation to perform, and the performance of equanimity needs to happen all the time.

Equanimity has two fundamental aspects. First, it means that we remain at peace, not getting excited when things are going well or depressed when things are not going so well. There is no need for either, because we really do not know what "well" and "not so well" are. How many times in the past have we miscalculated what we thought would be something good or something not so good? In our culture, we have a problem with peace. We think it is boring. Our heroes are always violent, manic, hyperactive, and overachieving. Even if they are doing good, they go around punching people. I include our sports heroes here as well, because the basis of sport is conflict. We worship the violence which pervades our sports and our entertainment. We love tragedy and conflict. We go for the extremes, but without cultivating

equanimity, which is the opposite of emotional extremes, we will not have the opportunity to develop the Wisdom of Equality.

Our emotions are objectless. They seem to have an object, but they do not. We do not hate something. The hatred comes from within us. The attachment does not come from a thing, it comes from us. If we remove that object of attachment or hatred, we will simply go and find another one. Because emotions are objectless, if we are attached or averse, we will not be able to develop the Wisdom of Equality, which requires that we do not have friends or enemies. This impartiality is the second aspect of equanimity. We are not indifferent; we simply do not keep some close and push others away. The Buddhas have no best friends. They are friends to everyone. Everyone is equally special to a Buddha, who sees perfection in all sentient beings. The Buddha said, "*I am a friend to those with no legs; I am a friend to those with two legs; I am a friend to those with four legs; I am a friend to those with many legs*." That covers everyone.

Equanimity is our natural state, but it is difficult to hold and easy to lose. When that happens, we should make an effort to regain it, and we will feel more comfortable. We must be careful not to mistake looking for equanimity with trying to sustain an elevated state of happiness. We have ingrained tendencies and habits from lifetimes. Sometimes we cannot understand why unpleasant things are manifesting now, but now is when the conditions are suitable for their manifestation. No matter what is occurring, however, the solution is always to cultivate equanimity. Some can remain peaceful with relative ease, and others may need to put forth a great effort to that end. We are all aiming for the same goal, and depending on where we are now, we adjust what is necessary. Our path is where our feet are. Sadly, some people think that to begin traversing the spiritual path, first they must be in a certain "place." That idea is mistaken. The path is always exactly where we are. The important thing is to do whatever we are doing with kindness and compassion, and present others with an example that they may want to emulate.

In every situation, we have the opportunity to manifest and cultivate Bodhisattva qualities. We must do it where we are because anywhere else does not exist right now. If we have an aspiration to do more, by fulfilling our duty where we are now, we will move closer to where we want to be. But abandoning where we are now is never going to lead to where we want to be. We must do our best here and then the opportunity will open to do our best somewhere else. We should not push. Things need to ripen, to develop organically. We deal with what and who we are and with the beings around us. We accept and embrace them as they are. Of course, this takes a lot of patience, because others may not be where we want them to be. We can be sure that we also are not where everyone else wants us to be either.

Everything is temporary anyway, so no need to get excited or depressed. People go crazy whenever one of our national athletes wins a gold medal in the Olympics. Everyone is so proud. But why be proud if we are not the ones competing? We do not win anything. Spectators always cheer, "We won!" What did we win? The Buddha said, "*Victory produces hatred. Defeat produces suffering. The wise desire neither victory nor defeat*." We always come back to equanimity, which is a fundamental aspect of our enlightened nature. Enlightenment benefits us because it allows us to dissolve the separation. It benefits all because it gives us the capacity to accomplish universal benefit at all times, without thought, and without effort.

THIRTY-SIX

I bow to you who teach that the ultimate Dharma Wheel is the final wheel, the ultimate Vehicle is the Great Way, the ultimate Great Way is the Vehicle of the Essence, and the ultimate Essence is great bliss.

In this text, Dolpopa focuses on that which is absolutely important. As we have explained earlier, there are three cycles of the Wheel of Dharma. According to the topic and those present at the teaching, we categorize whether a teaching belongs to the first, the second, or the third cycle. The teachings that belong to the first cycle are the Four Noble Truths: the renunciation of suffering and the causes of suffering. The second cycle includes all those teachings that alert us to the fact that phenomena have no inherent characteristics. Without the first cycle of the Wheel of Dharma, we do not get anywhere on the path. If we do not renounce the causes of suffering, it means we are not interested in the path. Once we get on the path, we must then realize that all our experiences are internal. That is a central teaching of Buddhism, and perhaps its most distinctive characteristic: that we are not capable with our ordinary, everyday minds, of experiencing reality as it is. We only experience reality as we imagine it to be, which should give us some humility.

Therefore, the second turning leads us a bit further into understanding our minds, which is important because our minds are the cause of our suffering and the way to our liberation. Our minds are the way, but not the cause of liberation. The cause is our own Buddha Nature, and that is the teaching of the third cycle of the Wheel of Dharma. Before we can be presented with the ultimate truth, we must eliminate wrong views and afflicted emotions. If we were to hear the teachings of the third cycle without a little bit of renunciation and understanding of the lack of inherent characteristics of phenomenal existence, we may misunderstand the idea that we have Buddha Nature and come wrongly to the conclusion that we are all gods here having a playdate. In truth, we are here searching and seeking because we are not happy. Although we are intrinsically blissful, the proof that we are not having the experience of complete happiness is that we were born, we are aging, we are getting ill, and we are going to die.

“I bow to you who teach that the ultimate Dharma Wheel is the final wheel.” This statement has two meanings. The third cycle is final in the sense that in the progression of teachings, we must understand the Four Noble Truths, we must understand how the mind works, and only then can we begin to understand the teaching on Buddha Nature. In that sense, it is the final teaching in the progression. Not only is it final in terms of being doctrinally last, it is last in terms of the capacity and maturation required to understand the teachings. It is also final in the sense that there is no teaching higher than Buddha Nature. This is not a sectarian statement. If all sentient beings have Buddha Nature, and Buddha Nature is the culmination of all perfection, what can be higher than that?

This truth needs to be understood deeply by first understanding how the mind works, and then accepting and relaxing into natural perfection. “Relax into perfection” was one of the favorite phrases of my Lama. We do not experience our perfection because we are agitated, and there are many things to undo before we are able to relax. We are agitated by our wrong views and afflicted emotions, and for most of us, it takes a lot of undoing to let go of these obscurations. The levels of agitation today for most people are both extreme and variable. There are some people in the history of Buddhism who have just heard the teachings once and become realized. There are others who needed to hear over and over and over. The disciple and personal assistant to the Buddha, Ananda, who recited from memory all the teachings of his master, was not realized, even after the Buddha’s *parinirvana*. He knew everything, but it just didn’t click for him. Eventually, on the evening before the First Council of the enlightened

disciples, he did become enlightened and was able to attend. It is because of Ananda that we have most of the teachings of the Buddhist canon.

Saying that the third cycle is the final or ultimate Dharma Wheel is not a sectarian statement. It is a statement about the content. The content of the first cycle is the content of renunciation, which is about avoiding harm to ourselves and others. The content of the second turning is about lack of characteristics, which helps us to understand that we cannot act in the world according to our perceptions, but must act according to vow or principle. We must do what is true, beneficial, kind, compassionate, and timely. In other words, we must do good. But it is the third turning of the Wheel of Dharma that eliminates the last obstacle to enlightenment.

> *There are two categories of Buddha's teachings: definitive and interpretive. Definitive teachings discuss the absolute nature of reality, while interpretive teachings deal with conventional realities and therefore must be investigated properly before they can be understood. Because there are these two divisions, we should never feel that merely because something we read or hear is the word of the Buddha, we must accept it literally and without question. To adopt such an uncritical attitude toward such an important matter as spiritual development is very dangerous, and completely lacking in wisdom.*
>
> *For all these reasons, in the third turning of the wheel Buddha gave guidelines for reconciling the first two turnings. He explained, for those who might otherwise have misunderstood, the way in which certain aspects of things can be said to be existent and others non-existent.*
> —Lama Thubten Yeshe

We are convinced that we are limited, ignorant, and evil. So, the third cycle purifies the mind of the fundamental wrong view of separation. Some of us fear that if we are not separate selves, we will lose ourselves. However, the moment we think of ourselves as separate individuals, it means that we are alone and that there are millions of "others." So, what we lose when we give up the false view of the separate self is fear. We lose smallness. We lose limitations. When we are no longer separate, what is there to which we do not belong?

We purify ourselves in sequence from the gross, subtle, and extremely subtle defilements. The first turning of the Wheel of Dharma purifies our actions. The second turning purifies our speech: all that we say and the words that we use internally to conceptualize the world. Concepts are just words and have no meaning beyond what we assign to them. Words have no fixed meaning, although we give them fixed meanings just as we give fixed meanings to appearances. My Lama used to say that our perceptions say more about us than about the objects of perception. If we say that something is beautiful, we are expressing something about our own tastes and perceptions. The third turning purifies the mind.

Next Dolpopa says, "The ultimate Vehicle is the Great Way." Within the Buddhist teachings, there are *yanas*, which means Vehicles. He says that the Great Way, the Mahayana, is the ultimate Vehicle. The different approaches to cultivation are described in the teachings of the Buddha as the *Sravakayana* or the Vehicle of the hearers, the *Pratyekabuddhayana*, or the Vehicle of the solitary realizers, and the *Bodhisattvayana* or the Vehicle of those on the path to full enlightenment. Dolpopa is not slighting the other paths. The goal of the Vehicle of the hearers is individual liberation: to identify the causes of one's suffering and eliminate them so that one can attain liberation from suffering. These seekers do not lack compassion, but believe that there is little they can do for others besides refraining from harming them and contributing to their suffering. That is a legitimate position, but when we compare it to others, it is not the highest goal possible. The goal of the solitary realizer Vehicle is a partial form of enlightenment. It is partial compared with the full, complete attainment. The Pratyekabuddhas attain perfect wisdom

but not perfect compassion because they do not share what they attain. Once they attain their partial enlightenment, they do not teach, but seek to enter nirvana.

The goal of the Bodhisattvayana is complete, perfect, universal enlightenment. The essence of this Vehicle is to achieve enlightenment to lead all other beings to enlightenment. The understanding is that there is no complete enlightenment without the union of wisdom and compassion. If there is no separation among beings, how can one of them become perfectly enlightened if there are others who are not? How can one be perfectly liberated if others are not? As long as others are suffering, we are suffering. As long as others are not enlightened, we are not enlightened. When Dolpopa says that the ultimate Vehicle is the Great Way, he is not demeaning other Vehicles but is comparing their goals: individual liberation, individual enlightenment, and universal enlightenment.

"The ultimate Great Way is the Vehicle of the Essence," is a necessary statement because, even within the Mahayana, there are those whose aim is universal enlightenment, but their understanding is that the way we all become liberated and enlightened is to cease to be, to cease to perceive, to cease to experience. It is disappearance. Another word for this view is nihilism. They say that the ultimate truth is that there is no truth. However, does this statement not imply an absolute truth? Can one negate something that supposedly does not exist? So, when Dolpopa speaks of the ultimate Great Way as the Vehicle of the Essence, he speaks here of Buddha Nature. It is the Mahayana that affirms Buddha Nature, not that denies the reality of all.

"The ultimate Essence is great bliss," is a statement that sometimes confuses people. Because there is such a strong emphasis on the recognition and the cultivation of peace, a lot of people, including some very advanced practitioners, come to believe that the ultimate state of enlightenment is a state of complete and utter neutrality where there is no experience or joy. However, within the Mahayana, the great Vehicle of the Essence of Buddha Nature, there is the affirmation, which is found throughout many sutras, that the ultimate Buddha Nature has four transcendent qualities: True Purity (the absence of all wrong views and afflicted emotions); True Being (not ceasing to be, but ceasing to be separate); True Bliss (not a neutral state, but a state of full happiness); and True Permanence (not experiencing death). It is these qualities that Dolpopa is referring to when he says that "the ultimate Essence is great bliss." It is not a neutral state, which is dangerously close to nothingness. Absolute neutrality with no qualities is tantamount to nothingness. Therefore, in the Great Middle Way, we speak of great bliss all the time, not to motivate people, but as the actual experience of those who realize ultimate enlightenment. They do not become stones, but rather infinitely happy. The word, ultimate, in our current usage has come to mean "the best." However, Dolpopa uses the word to mean "that, after which there is no more."

For us to speak about ultimate realities, we must begin with a recognition of things as they are. That is Right View. There are aspects of Right View that we can test through reason and experience, and there are aspects that, at present, are beyond our ability to understand through reason or to test through experience. However, it is reasonable to provisionally accept that which is offered by those who have given other information that we have tested repeatedly and found to be true. It is not unreasonable to accept the testimony of a reliable witness. In the Dharma, there are times when we come, due to our own limitations, to points where we cannot test or even see clearly. If the teachings have been right up to this point, according to our reason and experience, then isn't it also reasonable to accept, at least provisionally, those that we cannot test? These ultimate teachings that cannot be immediately tested are part of the reason that Dolpopa emphasizes constantly the importance of receiving the teachings in sequence. Not because it is impossible to go directly to the third cycle, but because we will lack confidence if we do not have the realization of earlier teachings that can be tested.

We practice the fundamental teachings first: the Four Noble Truths and the Precepts. Then we are in a much better situation to understand the teaching on the lack of characteristics of phenomena. When we really understand that what is happening is our experience and not reality, then we are better able to understand that, if phenomena are not what they seem, maybe there is something else. Wheels turn and return repeatedly to the same place. When we provisionally accept Right View, then we start practicing Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. Then Right Concentration leads us back to Right View, but it will be a deeper and more expansive Right View. We keep going around, and we come once again to Right View, until after repeated turns, Right View becomes Right Wisdom: the direct experience of reality. It is a reiterative process.

The Handbook was written to be recited in Jonang monasteries, so Dolpopa is not trying to convince anyone of his position. He is simply educating. Again, the word "ultimate" here does not mean best; it means final. What we need to understand is that these teachings are given with love. This Handbook is written by a teacher with a "special feeling of great love" for us. His intention was not to become famous. This is a man who, in the 14th century, was called *Kunchen*, which means omniscient. People called him *Dolpo Sangye*, the Buddha from Dolpo (his place of birth). In his lifetime, he was recognized as a Buddha. The greatest problem that Dolpopa had when he was visiting a monastery was that the local people would try to stop him from leaving. He had to escape in the night because thousands of people would congregate along the roads to try to stop him. When this Lama shares information, he shares it out of love. Dolpopa did not need followers, and he did not need wealth. When he decided to build the great Jonang Stupa, kings, merchants, and ordinary people sent all the materials for its construction without Dolpopa even asking. He did not have to please anyone. He was only interested in helping others recover their own Buddha Nature.

THIRTY-SEVEN

I bow to you who teach that the ultimate teaching is the Great Way, the ultimate Great Way is the Swift Path, the ultimate teaching in the Swift Path is the Kalachakra, and ultimate Kalachakra is bliss and emptiness.

As we approach the end of the Handbook, Dolpopa reminds us that, although there are many teachers, teachings, and lineages, when we make a determination to walk this path, sooner or later, we must commit to one way. One can be non-sectarian and particular; there is no contradiction. Once we have chosen a route, we need to stick to it and not change to another route part way into our journey. The example that my Lama used to give was that of wanting to cross a river and choosing a boat to get to the other side. There are many boats —some are large, some are smaller, some are pretty and some are not so pretty. There are different colors and styles, and each has its type and number of crew members. Many of them are probably fine, but once we choose the boat, and are in the middle of the river, it does not bode well to start trying to jump from boat to boat. We will probably fall in the water.

This Handbook was written to be recited daily in Jonang monasteries, where the commitment to the lineage had already been made. Dolpopa reminds those practitioners who have made the commitment that if we have chosen this boat, these are the instructions for the voyage, the order of things on this path. However, that is not a rejection or denial of the validity of other paths.

"The ultimate teaching is the Great Way," which is the Mahayana. The *yanas* or Vehicles of the hearers and the solitary realizers are considered foundational in scope and in practice. They are foundational in scope because their aim is individual liberation, not universal enlightenment. It is not that they lack compassion, but their understanding of compassion is that the best we can do for others is to abstain from harming them, to get out of samsara and become a model of how to do that. These Vehicles teach individual liberation. The solitary Buddhas, as the name implies, do not teach and do not associate with others, but pursue their individual liberation by themselves. Therefore, these two are not the Mahayana or the Great Path. They are narrower in scope, focused on individual liberation.

The Mahayana is called Great because it is great in terms of scope, goal, and acceptance of teachings. Why is the Mahayana great? The future Buddha Maitreya summarizes all of these reasons in his teaching known as the Sutralamkara. Maitreya says that there are seven different qualities of the Mahayana that make it the great Vehicle: 1) great joyful effort; 2) great goal; 3) great completion; 4) great wisdom; 5) great skillful means; 6) great fulfillment; and 7) great activity.

The Mahayana accepts the teachings of all three turnings of the Wheel of Dharma. It aspires not only to individual liberation but to universal enlightenment, and it does not exclude any sentient being from universal liberation; therefore, "the ultimate teaching is the Great Way." The Mahayana understands the idea of individual liberation to be a false view based on separation. We understand from our study of the Dharma that if the dualistic view of self and other is false, then individual liberation is an impossibility. If there is no duality, how can one become liberated and the other not? Anything like that must be temporary, illusory, and conditioned.

"The ultimate Great Way is the Swift Path." Within the Mahayana there is the *Bodhisattvayana*, and a subset of that, a particular way to practice, is called the Swift Path or the *Vajrayana*. In Buddhism we talk about the ground, the path, and the fruit. The ground is the basis, and in the Mahayana, most lineages accept that the basis is Buddha Nature. The path refers to the practices that lead one to uncover that Buddha Nature, and the fruit is the fully manifest Buddha Nature. The *Bodhisattvayana* undertakes all the practices that remove the obstructions and impurities from the basis, which is Buddha Nature. It is a very systematic approach to removing those obstructions by taking the precepts,

cultivating the four immeasurable thoughts, practicing the perfections, etc. The general estimate of the time this requires is three interminable eons, which is three incalculable periods of time.

In the *Vajrayana* our teachers ask, "Is the fruit different from the ground?" The ground is Buddha Nature covered, the fruit is Buddha Nature uncovered, so in the Vajrayana we take the fruit as the path. That means that if we already have Buddha Nature, then the swiftest way is to remember it, recognize it, and manifest it. It is not necessary to go through an arduous, time-consuming process, because Buddha Nature is already fully and completely there. The slow path works because one is slowly convincing oneself that Buddha Nature is being purified. However, that is unnecessary because Buddha Nature cannot be contaminated. It is always perfectly pure, so taking the fruit as the path means that we affirm our Buddha Nature constantly by remembering it. We assume our Buddha Nature, and that is why in many of our prayers and practices we say things like, "I shall manifest on a golden lotus in the Holy Presence." We are not at the beginning; we are already Buddha and do not have to go through all these stages.

The Swift Path, as practiced in the Jonang, recognizes that the way may be gradual, but enlightenment is sudden. If we go into a dark room, our approach to the light switch may take time, but the moment we turn the switch on, the whole room is instantly illuminated. All the practices in the *Bodhisattvayana* and in the Swift Path are merely ways of throwing that switch. The *Vajrayana* simply asks, what can we do to make sure that we find the switch more quickly? In the Swift Path, we are told that the switch is remembrance of our Buddha Nature. It is not far; it is always there. The more we cultivate that awareness, the closer we are, because we have never been separated from our Buddha Nature. Limitation and suffering are an illusion. When we have a nightmare, we can get heart palpitations and sweat and even fall off the bed, but is anything in the dream really happening? When we wake up, we do not have to fix or re-work what happened in the dream, because we see that it was never really there. The Swift Path is the one that reminds us that we already have Buddha Nature, so we just have to remember, to wake up. Of course, there are techniques for helping us to remember and recognize our Buddha Nature. To remember is conceptual, but to recognize is direct wisdom.

Within the Swift Path, there are different styles. For the Nyingma, the ultimate practice is Dzogchen. For the Sakya, it is Lamdre. For the Kagyu, it is Mahamudra. For the Jonang, "the Swift Path is the Kalachakra." Our lineage has always distinguished itself for holding the full teachings of the Kalachakra, which is the greatest of all tantras. Tantra is a type of text, a very large text. Tantra means "extensive." Our central practices are derived from the Kalachakra, and the practice is called Vajra Yoga. Vajra means indestructible and swift like lightning. The meaning of Kalachakra is very important. *Chakra* means wheel or turning, and *kala* means time. We are bringing our Buddha Nature into this time, into this experience. We are bringing the ultimate reality into this conventional reality. We are not waiting for another time. We are relishing this fruit now.

We can use Vajra Yoga to increase our knowledge, to improve our health, to attain many objectives, because the right approach has good side effects. Sadly, some people become overly enamored with the side effects, and become more interested in the perks than in the real point of the practice. People become enamored with the path instead of what they took the path to accomplish, the fruit. The path can give us status and many other things, so Dolpopa reminds us here not to take this path for anything but bliss and emptiness. The purpose is not to become famous or powerful or knowledgeable. It is emptiness, which is wisdom, and bliss, which is compassion. The purpose is the union of those two. That is why Dolpopa reminds us that, "The ultimate Kalachakra is bliss and emptiness." That is the goal of practice.

This does not mean that we reject the discipline of cultivation, but that we turn the manifestation of bliss and emptiness into the path. We can do that. Of course, now we have limitations, but that does not mean we cannot act. Just because we cannot help everyone does not mean that we cannot help anyone. Just because we are not ready to give everything does not mean that we can give nothing. Just because we do not have all the answers does not mean that we have no answers. We are encouraged to do as much as we can: to love and have as much compassion as we can, to be as peaceful as we can in everyday life. We don't wait until enlightenment to be kind. We don't wait to have all the marbles to join the game. We play now!

Enlightenment is not magic. It is the most real experience. It is called Thusness: reality as it is. The first thing that we must see is that all beings are worthy of compassion and that no being deserves to suffer. We all suffer as a consequence of our previous mistakes, but we do not deserve to suffer. That does not negate the law of karma. We make mistakes out of ignorance, not out of malice. Deserving would imply that the person acted wrongly on purpose and now ought to suffer the consequences. Karma, the idea that there is a consequence for action, is not the same as thinking that someone deserves punishment or reward. Everyone deserves compassion, happiness, bliss. The worst of us are simply more mistaken than others, and those who are most mistaken will suffer more. We have an opportunity every single moment of every single day to show compassion to others and to practice the ultimate Kalachakra: bringing into this time the union of wisdom and compassion, emptiness and bliss.

Buddha Nature is already here. Afflictions and limitations are illusory. They are not real. Their effects are real. Only illusion is separating us from enlightenment. Wisdom tells us that this is not really happening, but bliss tells us that it is our duty to make it better. Film is a very good metaphor. All our emotional ups and downs are projections on the screen of the mind. Some people like romantic comedies, and that is what they project on their screens, or war movies, or horror. It is our choice. We are running a mental movie, but the Buddha said, "Wake up!" We are in the movie house, and sooner or later the lights will be turned on. If by chance, at any moment, we can see through the illusion, then enlightenment is instant. We have already had enlightened moments. We have managed to see through many of our past wrong views. That is enlightenment. There are no drum rolls and flashing lights with enlightenment. When we see, we see. But we may not see it all at the same time. So, if we string together many of those enlightened moments, then we have enlightenment.

We do not minimize suffering or claim that the pain of sentient beings is not real. The pain and the suffering are very real, but the cause of the suffering is not. Buddhism recognizes suffering and its causes and seeks to end that suffering. Suffering is not someone else's responsibility. I may not be oppressing beings directly, but if I am not doing anything to stop it, then I am condoning it and supporting it. Real Buddhism has always been engaged and should continue to be. A child may come to school who has a terrible home life or not enough to eat and cannot concentrate. That is real suffering. The suffering is not an illusion, but the cause of that child's suffering is an illusion. It is the illusion of separation and supremacy, the false idea that some of us deserve more than others. Some of us decided to establish a system, based on separation and supremacy, in which that child's suffering can happen, in which our interests are more important than those of that child. The cause, then, is false. We see the suffering all around us, and that is motivation for deep engagement. That is avoiding harm and doing good.

We do what we can to alleviate suffering, and part of that can be activism. Buddhism is not a passive path. We are not called to be passive but to be peaceful activists, just like the Buddha was. We can become involved in changing the system, like the Buddha did. He was able to abolish animal sacrifice, which was, at the time, the common denominator for most religious practices in India. The Buddha ordained women in a culture where women had virtually no freedom outside of the home. The Buddha

violated the caste system and violated the law by taking into his Sangha criminals who were being pursued by the authorities.

Suffering is a taint, while the true nature of all sentient beings is pure, blissful, and permanent. That cannot be changed. The Buddha Nature of a hungry child and a woman in jail and all the animals at the slaughterhouse is incorruptible. The Buddha Nature of all sentient beings cannot be tainted. That is what the Buddha came to tell us and to invite us to realize. Buddha means awake, awake from this nightmare. We suffer because we are asleep and are having this nightmare. If we wake up, all the horrible things that are happening in the nightmare come to a full stop. Yet our awakening will not immediately change anything for those who are still in illusion. While they are having the nightmare, their suffering is very real. If we see a coiled garden hose and mistake it for a large snake, we can become frightened, and our heart will beat fast. But when we realize that it is a garden hose, we do not need to call animal control. When we are enlightened, all these causes of suffering are recognized for what they are: illusions. One of the great things about enlightenment is that it is retroactive. The moment we become enlightened, we perceive directly that there is no real suffering; there never was.

The beauty of the Mahayana, the Great Path, is that even though we may have accumulated enough wisdom and compassion to extinguish our own suffering, we refuse to accept liberation while others are suffering. Because of wisdom, we have gone beyond, but because of compassion, we have remained. That is why the beautiful word, *tathagata*, means both “well gone” and “well come.” Because of wisdom, the enlightened are well gone, gone from suffering. Because of compassion, they are well come, come into suffering to wake up others. In practicing compassion, in reducing the suffering of others, we find our bliss.

THIRTY-EIGHT

I bow to you who teach that the ultimate view is the Great Middle, the ultimate Great Middle is birthless and free from extremes, the ultimate freedom from extremes is natural luminosity, and ultimate luminosity is great bliss.

There are various Buddhist views of reality, and they are all valid Buddhist views, but they are ranked according to the capacity, the maturity, and the tendency of students. There is the Vaibhashika view, that compounded phenomena, uncompounded phenomena, conventional phenomena, and ultimate phenomena are truly established. A closely related view, the Sautrantika, considers only present minute particles and present moments of consciousness as truly established. The Chittamatra view says that consciousness devoid of apprehended object and apprehending subject is truly established. There is another view, the Madhyamaka, with two sub-divisions: the Svatantrika sub-school affirms through logical reasoning that ultimate reality is self-empty, and the Prasangika sub-school implies that ultimate reality is self-empty through reduction to absurd consequences. Then there is the Maha Madhyamaka, the Great Middle, which says that compounded phenomena, all adventitiously posited uncompounded phenomena and self-emptiness are false, but Buddha Nature; self-cognizing, self-illuminating pristine wisdom; all ultimate Buddha qualities primordially indwelling intrinsically; immutable thoroughly established nature; and Other Emptiness are truly established. (There is no need for us to be concerned with these intricacies, unless we are interested in the various philosophical understandings of the Dharma.)

> *One regards reality as empty of what is not there, but as to what remains there, one understands that which is present thus: "This is present."*
> —Buddha Shakyamuni, Culasunnata Sutta

We subscribe to the Great Middle, which is the tradition of Buddha Shakyamuni, Maitreya, Nagarjuna, Asanga, Vasubandhu, Dolpopa, and Taranatha. The Great Middle, with slight variations, is accepted by most Tibetan lineages, including the Jonang, Nyingma, Kagyu, and some Sakyas. It is not accepted by the Geluk, who favor the Middle, but not the Great Middle. This is not to say that they are wrong. The Jonang, following Dolpopa, recognize that all these views are not contradictory, but necessary. We must gradually move from one view to a clearer view, to the clearest view, just like climbing a mountain and looking down on a valley. The higher we go up the mountain, the broader the view of the valley. Dolpopa does not claim that there is something wrong with any of these views.

The renowned Heart Sutra concludes with the mantra: ***gate gate paragate parasamgate bodi svaha***. This mantra is a direct reference to this gradation of views. *gate* means “go.” The mantra can be translated: “Go, go, go beyond, go perfectly beyond to enlightenment.” The sutra invites us to move from the more limited views to the more inclusive views. Sadly, many of those who hold these other conceptions of reality —atomistic, idealistic, nihilistic— are not all-inclusive. They claim that their conception is the truth and the only truth, and this is a limitation. Each one finds inconsistency in accepting the validity of other views. The insight of Dolpopa and the Jonang lineage is that all these views are valid progressive understandings, without contradiction.

Notice that Dolpopa says here “ultimate view,” not “ultimate vision.” View is akin to perspective, while vision means direct perception. He does not say that it is the ultimate truth, but that the Great Middle is the ultimate view, meaning that it is the closest we can come to describing what can only be perceived directly in meditation. But we must not mistake our view for direct perception. Anything that can be stated in words is a concept, and the words themselves are limited by the presumptions of the language, the ability of the speaker, and the conceptual limitations of the hearer. Our understanding is always subjective. The speaker has no control over the way the statement is received, and that is why there is

so much necessary repetition. If the teaching is repeated in slightly different ways from different angles, it may be easier to understand it.

There are verbal and conceptual limitations to the transmission of the Dharma. We have nothing to compare to ultimate reality because our ordinary perception is of conventional reality. In Buddhism, we are invited to meditate in the true sense of the word: to rest in the empty luminosity of the mind. When we truly do that, without elaboration and conceptual proliferation, we can directly perceive reality. However, the moment we come out of meditation into post meditation, we cannot put perfectly into words what we have perceived. How does one describe a rose to someone who has never seen a flower? "The ultimate view is the Great Middle," then, means that although persons and phenomena have no inherent existence (they are insubstantial, impermanent, and dependent on causes and conditions), Buddha Nature is pure, truly existent, blissful, and permanent.

Dolpopa continues by saying that, "The ultimate Great Middle is birthless." Some Buddhist lineages accept a truly existent Buddha Nature, but consider that it is produced, that it begins as something less than full Buddha Nature, and one must construct and add to it until one has full Buddha Nature. This view considers that Buddha Nature is a seed which, as in conventional reality, cannot grow without conditions like water, earth, sunlight. Without the conditions, a seed will not produce the plant. Dolpopa asserts here that the "ultimate Great Middle is birthless," which means that Buddha Nature is already fully, perfectly, completely existent. What is required is simply a recognition that there is no separation and no lack of completeness. Buddha Nature is not a do-it-yourself project that one must complete.

Nor is Buddha Nature an eternal soul or an eternal supersoul (an aggregate of all individual souls) that is unchanging and separate from everything else that is. Birthless here does not refer to some god-like being. It is not like the conception of self held by non-Buddhists. Dolpopa explains that this existence of Buddha Nature is not a separate entity that stands apart from and against all other reality. Because Buddha Nature is not a thing, he is not saying that it exists substantially. There is no being (entity), no matter how big or compounded; there is simply *being* (the verb). Existence exists, but not existences.

The ultimate Great Middle is not subject to causes and conditions and is "free from extremes." It does not fall into the idea that Buddha Nature is somehow a separate entity. Nagarjuna, our great teacher, said, "It is not this, it is not that, it is not both, it is not neither." We are not talking about conventional existence. Only that which is conventional can be designated as "this or that or both or neither." Ours is the Middle *beyond* extremes, not the Middle *between* extremes. Many people, when they imagine the middle, assume that it is halfway between the two poles. But we speak here of a Middle beyond extremes. It has nothing to do with extremes and is free from extremes.

Next, Dolpopa tells us that the ultimate freedom from extremes is "natural luminosity." To view things as existent or non-existent, here or there, is extreme. Extremes are grasped in all the categories of contradiction in which the human mind dwells: realism and nihilism, monism and pluralism, determinism (both theistic and karmic) and indeterminism, self-causation and external causation, and many others. Our perceptions are discriminations based on contrast. To be constantly defining things in opposition to other things is our normal state in conventional reality.

Much of what we recognize conventionally is done through opposition and elimination. For example, when we see a cow, we see an animal that is not a horse or a pig or a zebra or a giraffe. When we see a person, we recognize who they are by knowing all the people that they are not. Uniquely in western thought, and not until the 19th Century, Ludwig Wittgenstein "discovered" that the opposite of black is not white, as most people believe, but not-black. Dolpopa explains that ultimate reality is free from concepts and discriminations based on contrast. When we directly see ultimate reality, we are not comparing it to anything. When we have direct access to reality, there is no conceptual elaboration. He

calls this “natural luminosity” because it is a direct perception of reality as it is. Luminosity is a word that we use to indicate clear vision. Luminosity here not only illuminates other things, it illuminates itself. When we perceive reality directly, it is self-illuminating. It is natural, not created or fabricated. It arises from itself. The light of a conventional candle does not arise from itself, but our Buddha Nature does not need to be lit by an external fire.

“Ultimate luminosity is great bliss” means that when one directly perceives reality as it is, that is not only the end of suffering but the awareness of immense, unlimited, permanent bliss. When we see things as they are, our own suffering and the suffering of others ceases to be. Are we saying that when one person attains full enlightenment, all attain full enlightenment? The answer is both yes and no. For example, if there are ten people who have all gone together to form a lottery pool, only one of them will go and buy the ticket. When the winner is announced, and the group has just won millions of dollars, all are equal winners. But for a few moments, only the one who holds the ticket knows and enjoys the bonanza. Therefore, when one sentient being becomes enlightened, all beings share in that joy. We are all, in a very real sense, still living off the enlightenment of the Buddha Shakyamuni 2600 years ago. But only those who are fully aware of that natural luminosity are “enjoying” the ultimate bliss. Those who are not enlightened are at a different stage of recognition.

The Buddha Nature of a cat, a roach, a saint, and a sinner are the same. The level of awareness and the capacity to develop that awareness, however, are certainly different. But in our Buddha Nature, as our teachers Maitreya and Asanga said, “There is nothing to add and nothing to take away.” The person who is enlightened sees the unreality of the confusion of all others. The others do not see either their own enlightenment or their own confusion. So, there are sentient beings who are fully enlightened before others realize that they are enlightened, but they are also enlightened. That is why the word “Buddha” means “awake.” It refers to being awakened to our own enlightened nature, but it is not that there are sentient beings who are not enlightened. Ultimately a Buddha sees the enlightenment of all sentient beings. The Buddha sees the enlightened reality of all sentient beings, and simultaneously sees that they are not aware of their enlightenment. He therefore seeks to awaken them, not to His enlightenment, but to their own. He is not trying to save them and take them somewhere, but is saying to them that they are already there.

We have our *aha*! moments and those moments when we wonder what the *aha*! was really about. We keep going back and forth, and that is why practice is so important. We have all had many enlightened moments, but we also lose them easily. We must become familiarized with the enlightened moments. What separates us from our enlightenment is our wrong views —the view of separation, that we are somehow apart and distinct from all others, and the view of supremacy, the belief that our interests should come first. We must understand that we have no substantial existence as separate individuals. The sooner we understand that, the sooner we will stop suffering. There is a difference in how we feel when we are focusing on our own problems versus when we are focusing on other people’s happiness. If we are focusing on the welfare and well-being of others, we have no time to worry about ourselves. That is a blissful feeling, infinitely better than lamenting and whining about “poor me.”

The ultimate way to directly perceive the world is precisely non-separation. When we perceive directly that we are not separate from others, that is great bliss. Separation is great fear, and non-separation is great bliss. There is no reason to fear or to fight. However, we do not see things as they truly are, and we are acting as if our wrong views were real. We have the wrong view of separation, and we act on it, which leads directly to attachment for what we find pleasant, aversion for what we find unpleasant, and indifference for what we find neutral. Out of that comes karma, both positive and negative, and whether the chains are made of iron or gold, we are still chained.

The view shared by Dolpopa helps us recognize clear vision, but it is not a substitute. It is helpful, but we must come, at some point, to the direct perception of non-duality. This is not something that is reserved for the specially gifted but is something that we all can and will do. Enlightenment is inevitable. If we do not see reality directly in this body, but we hear enough about it, at the moment of death, we will see it and recognize it.

THIRTY-NINE

I bow to you who teach that the ultimate view is emptiness free from extremes, the ultimate emptiness is apprehensible emptiness, the ultimate conduct is great compassion, and the ultimate compassion is non-apprehending.

These final texts are the essence and the culmination of the Dharma. This text begins by saying that the "ultimate view is emptiness free from extremes." Remember the difference between view and vision. Vision is direct perception. In Sanskrit the term for view is *dristi* and the term for vision, wisdom, is *vidya*. In English, view and vision have similar roots, but in Sanskrit, they have completely different roots. *Dristi* means view and also means opinion. It is important to acknowledge that anything that can be put into words is not the ultimate reality but only an approximation. Some approximations are accurate, and some are not. View is what can be said about vision, which is direct perception, but it is still words, subject to interpretation.

There is a need for multiple expressions because people understand things differently. That is why Buddhist lineages that agree very closely about almost everything (except method) have different terms for the same concepts. But there is never an occasion when anyone should say, "This is the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth, and everything else is false." It is very important to always know that our aim is for each one to have direct perception of the truth, which is vision. How one expresses that depends on one's understanding, maturity, vocabulary, language, etc. It is important to remember that words are just words, and never a substitute for direct perception.

Here Dolpopa is speaking of view: "the ultimate view is emptiness free from extremes." What are the extremes? When we speak of two extremes, the two that are indicated are eternalism and nihilism. Eternalism is the wrong view that all sentient beings and all phenomena exist substantially, permanently, and independently. A modified version of eternalism is that phenomena do not exist permanently or substantially, but selves do. A further modification says that individual selves do not exist permanently and substantially, but a supersoul does exist independently, substantially, and permanently. Many Hindu lineages hold this view of a supreme self, a supersoul or *paramatma*. There are various forms of eternalism. All theistic religions are eternalist by definition, believing in all-powerful deities. The monotheistic religions are a prime example of eternalism. All posit the existence of an eternal, independent, substantial god and individual selves. That is why they invite you to enjoy heaven or roast in hell eternally.

The other extreme is rather simple: nihilism. *Nil* in Latin means nothing. This is the view of nothingness. It is the view that nothing is real, that the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth, that everything is an illusion, including the view that everything is an illusion. It is a bit disingenuous, however, to assert that nothing is true except the statement that nothing is true! In the Jonang view, nihilism leads to crass materialism. If we believe that there is no ultimate truth, and this illusion is all we have, we might as well accumulate as many toys as we can. Even as nihilism leads to materialism, materialism leads to nihilism. They are two sides of the same coin, and sadly, today, materialism is the dominant view of our culture, even of the so-called religious.

When Dolpopa says here that the "ultimate view is emptiness free from extremes," he is saying that our view of emptiness —the Great Middle— is free from both extremes. While all phenomena and all individual selves are impermanent, there is True Permanence. We reject the extreme of eternalism, but we do not reject True Permanence.

The Buddha states in the Mahaparinirvana Sutra:

> *To think of the impermanent as eternal is perverse;*
> *to think of the eternal as impermanent is perverse.*
> *To think of non-being as being is perverse;*
> *to think of being as non-being is perverse*.

Even as we affirm that all selves and any conglomeration of selves are empty, we do not fall into nihilism because the Great Middle Way view is that ultimate truth effectively and substantially exists and can be described by the four great qualities: True Purity, True Being, True Bliss, True Permanence. Buddha Nature, Buddha Qualities, Buddha Activity, and Buddha Realms are always real and true in all places and times. That is why Dolpopa asserts emptiness free from extremes. One of our prayers begins with the line, "*Reverence to the glorious, primordial Buddha, basis of all*." Without basis, where would illusion stand? The basis is what is, and our misapprehension of what is, is illusion. It is not that we completely make up the world; we misapprehend it. Our view of reality is clouded by wrong views and afflicted emotions. The basis, Buddha Nature, is often described as space. Space is all pervasive and everything that exists, exists within it. Everything that is, is in Buddha Nature.

Dolpopa continues: "The ultimate emptiness is apprehensible emptiness." The ultimate emptiness is not nothing. It is, as Dolpopa calls it, "Other Emptiness." That means that Primordial Buddha or Buddha Nature is empty of all that is other than itself: all that is phenomenal, all that is perishable, all that is suffering, but it is not empty of pure form, pure qualities, and pure activity. He says ultimate emptiness is apprehensible because a pure mind (free from wrong views and afflicted emotions) apprehends, without obstruction, the pure Buddha forms, the pure Buddha qualities, and the pure Buddha activities. They are not hidden or conceptual, but can be directly perceived. We are not constructing anything; we are removing obstructions. Dolpopa explains that this is a path of purification of wrong views and afflicted emotions. Buddha Nature is already present. We are not fabricating anything, and that is why we do not need to visualize deities, mandalas, or pure lands. Buddha Nature is already there; if we remove the veil, the obstruction, we will directly perceive it.

> *The ground of purification is the universal-ground primordial awareness that is like the sky, the object of purification is the incidental stains that are like clouds, the purifying agent is the truth of the path that is like a relentless wind, and the result of purification is the separated result that is like the sky free of clouds.* —Dolpopa, The Fourth Council

"Apprehensible" means, then, not that you can grab it, but that when we are ready, the pure mind can directly perceive Buddha forms, qualities, and activities. The Buddhas are permanent. Their forms and qualities and activities are permanent, but when we are not ready to see, we cannot see. One of our great teachers, Asanga, retreated for twelve years with the goal of seeing his *yidam*, Maitreya. Yidam is difficult to translate; it refers to our meditational deity, that aspect of Buddha Nature with which we resonate most strongly. Asanga tried through visualization to see Maitreya for twelve years, and finally gave up. Then he encountered a dog that was wounded and infested with worms. He felt such compassion that he wanted to remove the worms without killing them, so he began to use his tongue to remove the worms from the wounded dog. By that extraordinary act of compassion, when he was not trying to see Maitreya, he actually had a direct perception of Him. What had been standing in the way was trying to make the form of Buddha Nature conform to his wishes. "I will remain in a cave for all this time, and He will show up!" When he performed a selfless act of compassion and saw Maitreya, he asked where He had been for the last twelve years. Maitreya said that He had been there all along, but Asanga was not ready to see. The story goes on to say that Asanga then carried Maitreya on his shoulder and walked through a village. No one could even see Maitreya, except for one old woman who saw a dog. So, what is visible to us depends on our level of purity.

“The ultimate conduct is great compassion.” The ultimate activity or conduct is great compassion, which is spontaneous and non-referential or “non-apprehending.” Spontaneous means that there is nothing contrived about it. The Buddhas and the Great Bodhisattvas, when they encounter suffering, do not calculate whether to help or not. Their actions are spontaneous. The example that my teacher used to give is the reaction that we have when we put our hand on a hot stove. We do not deliberate about our action, but spontaneously remove our hand. In the same way, great compassion is spontaneous. There is no calculation.

“And the ultimate compassion is non-apprehending” means there is absolutely no judgement involved. Great compassion does not judge whether the being is a worthy or suitable recipient of compassion by asking such things as, is this being good or bad, inimical or friendly? Great compassion itself is empty. The act is empty, the performer is empty, and the recipient is empty. The performer is empty because there is no concept of “I am doing this.” The act is empty in the sense that the performer has no pride in the action. The emptiness of the recipient means that one does not individualize the recipient. These are the three emptinesses of great compassion. There is no thought, “I am doing this.” There is no thought, “This is a great thing I am doing.” There is no thought, “This is who I am doing it for.”

Great compassion is also a negation of separation. Remember that the true meaning of compassion is “to suffer with.” Therefore, the suffering of others is not outside of us; it is not pity. There is suffering for us and for them, and for all. As we practice, that spontaneous feeling of compassion will begin to arise.

It requires wisdom not to be overcome by sentimentality. Our teachers say that we must dedicate substantial time and effort to purify our own minds and emotions. Great compassion is not overwhelming, but attachment and aversion are. At our present level, it is very difficult to separate attachment and aversion from kindness and compassion. The afflicted emotions will overwhelm us, so we must develop sufficient wisdom, meaning the view of emptiness and the view of Buddha Nature, so that we do not become trapped by this feeling of being overwhelmed by so much to do and knowing we can’t do it all.

We do not have to do it all, and we cannot do it all. We must do what is proximal to us. If someone comes and asks, we must help. If something is happening in front of us that we can remedy, we should. Much of the suffering we are aware of is beyond our reach and our capacity. For those beings, we extend prayers, but that is our current limit.

We remedy that which we can remedy, and by doing that, we are building our compassion muscles. But to subject ourselves to a suffering that we cannot manage is counterproductive for us and for others. It would be to the detriment of our own cultivation to try to address every situation. We know that we cannot go into a gym for the first time and lift the 500-pound barbell. We will get crushed.

We must accumulate wisdom and merit so that we are able to help. Otherwise, we cannot help. The first thing that we must accumulate is peace. It is peace that will allow us to deal with suffering without being overwhelmed. In his book, Altruism, the Venerable Matthieu Ricard speaks about the difference between empathy and compassion. Empathy will burn us out because empathy means to feel what the other feels. Compassion means that we are ready to help. What burns us out is to take on the negative feelings of others.

That is why meditation is so important. I am talking about cultivating *samadhi*, which means “equal holding” or “holding steady.” If we cultivate that, then nothing can shake us. We will do as much as we can without being upset.

FORTY

I bow to you who teach, for the benefit of ultimate disciples, that the ultimate initiation is the transcendent, the ultimate realization is the definitive meaning of the completion stage, and the ultimate attainment is the great sublime attainment.

Dolpopa has made it explicit in previous verses of the Handbook that different disciples or practitioners must be taught according to capacity, maturity, and tendency. In each of these areas, there is a level called low, middling, and superior. Capacity refers to the ability to understand and accept the Dharma. Low capacity practitioners are those who pick and choose what they like and don't like. The middling capacity practitioners are those disciples who say that the Dharma may be all good, but they are only interested in going to a certain point, not feeling ready to go further with it. The superior capacity practitioners are those who accept the full Dharma and strive to accomplish all of it.

Maturity concerns our level of understanding in relation to the Dharma. Some people, in the ordinary sense, are more mature because they take what they do seriously. For example, we may have had friends at school who thought it was all a game and just studied occasionally, for deadlines or for major exams. The Dharma is similar. There are some who are happy to do the minimum, and that is low maturity. Middling maturity includes those who have a generally steady practice but allow situations in life to interrupt their practice for brief or extended periods. When situations are difficult or not favorable for practice, they stop until the situation changes. Those of superior maturity constantly practice, regardless of conditions. All the above are Dharma practitioners, and all are on the path.

Tendency relates to our goal in cultivating the Dharma. Those with low tendency focus only on their personal liberation. The middling tendency are those practitioners who are focusing primarily on their own liberation but dedicate some merit to universal enlightenment. The superior tendency practitioner is committed to universal enlightenment, even if it postpones his or her individual liberation and enlightenment. These three types of tendencies correspond to the three types of Bodhisattvas that are described in the scriptures. The first type enters liberation ahead of everyone else and has other beings follow. The second type takes everyone together to the far shore. The third and superior type puts others ahead and is the last one to enter liberation.

Therefore, we have three low, three middling, and three superior levels of practitioners. There are many possible combinations. Here, however, Dolpopa speaks of the ultimate disciples, those who have superior capacity, superior maturity, and superior tendency. We should be honest and sincere about where we are now, but that should not stop us from aspiring to be ultimate disciples. A category in Buddhist thought is the sincere mind, and it includes knowing one's current state and accepting that one is capable of the ultimate. We are all capable of being an ultimate disciple because we have the same nature as all our great teachers and all the Buddhas of the past, present, and future. We recite prayers that are composed by those who were ultimate disciples, and when we recite their words and thoughts, we join our minds with their minds.

We assume nothing about a group and start teaching the basics, but very soon we begin to realize which people are on which level. In Jonang we always say, "No secrets, no sides." If someone does not have the capacity, it will just pass through. We teach nothing that is dangerous, and those who are not ready are not ready.

"The ultimate initiation is the transcendent." There are four initiations or empowerments. Both terms are very misleading, but they are the terms in current use. The Sanskrit word on which they are based is *abhisheka*, which means asperging or sprinkling with water. It is very dusty in India, so people often go out in the morning and sprinkle water to keep the dust down. It is a washing or a purification, and it has taken on other significant meanings, like keeping the negativity down. There are four traditional

initiations in the Vajrayana. The first is the initiation that purifies the body of the acts of killing, taking what is not freely given, and exploiting the bodies of others. It is often referred to as the Vase Initiation because it is ritually given with a little water from a vase. The second initiation, called the Secret Initiation, purifies speech. It eliminates or reduces the tendency to lie, to slander, to use harsh words, and to speak foolishly. The third initiation, which is called the Wisdom Initiation, purifies the mind. It eliminates or reduces the tendency to covet, to be malicious, and to hold acquired wrong views.

The fourth initiation, which Dolpopa is calling the ultimate, is the sublime, symbolic, or Transcendent Initiation, which eliminates or reduces the subtle obscurations of body, speech, and mind. Most importantly, it reduces the innate wrong views of separation and supremacy. When Dolpopa says here that "the ultimate initiation is the transcendent," he means that if we do not address the wrong views of separation and supremacy, all the other faults will return. This situation is often compared to an elephant who goes into a river and bathes thoroughly, emerges from the river all clean, and then picks up dust with his trunk and covers himself with it. Of course, the dust is to protect himself from the sun, but from the human point of view, it appears the elephant has bathed only to immediately get dirty again. This image is used to say that those who do not eliminate the wrong views of separation and supremacy are like bathing elephants who very soon will be covered again with dust. All the wrong views and negative actions will come back if those two, separation and supremacy, are not addressed. The Transcendent Initiation is the one that eliminates the innate wrong views, those wrong views that are born with these bodies and these minds. Even a young child has the wrong view of separation and supremacy and is very good at manifesting those views!

"The ultimate realization is the definitive meaning of the completion stage." The approximation and completion stages are elements of traditional Vajrayana, the Swift Path. These have been ritualized in most lineages, but less so in the Jonang, because the centuries of persecution demanded that we dispense with excessive ritual. We are grateful for our period of persecution because it brought us closer to the basics. We could not travel with elaborate costumes and crowns and instruments and ritual implements.

The approximation stage in many lineages has been ritualized into visualizations of one's Yidam or meditational deity, that aspect of our Buddha Nature with which we identify most. For some it may be Tara or Vajrasattva or any number of others. If we were, for example, given twenty pictures of ourselves and asked to pick the one we like the best, we would probably find one that we prefer, even though all the pictures are of us. In the same way, these Yidams are pictures of our Buddha Nature, and at different times in our lives we identify with one form or another. The approximation stage, traditionally in most lineages, involves this visualization of the Yidam.

The completion stage is when practitioners integrate the qualities of the Yidam. They develop what is called "divine pride," so that during meditation they assume all the qualities, the regalia, the hand implements, and the gestures of the meditational deity. However, that is not what the Jonang do. Dolpopa states here that the definitive meaning of the completion stage is to manifest our Buddha Nature; it has nothing to do with costumes and crowns and gestures. It is doing our best in ordinary life, day-by-day, moment-by-moment, to manifest love, compassion, equanimity, and rejoicing in the happiness and virtue of others. That is the definitive meaning of the completion stage.

We can wear all the crowns in the world, but if we are not kind to others, what is our completion stage worth? What is worthwhile is to behave like a Buddha. In the beginning, we just act like a Buddha as much as we can. Sometimes we don't feel like doing something, but we know it is probably best and beneficial to do so. Sometimes we feel like ripping someone's head off, but we manage to refrain. Perhaps we try to see the suffering of those who are problematic for us. Our completion stage is that we manifest our Buddha Nature, show it, live it.

The "great sublime attainment" is to help others manifest their Buddha Nature. That is even greater than manifesting our own. One way in which we invite others to manifest their Buddha Nature is by allowing them, helping them to see it. That is why our behavior and example are so important. We have all been inspired by seeing someone else. We should also be that inspiration, so that others find and see their own Buddha Nature and begin to manifest it.

Despite the elevated language, this text is giving a very basic teaching. We aspire to become ultimate disciples with the highest maturity, capacity, and inclination. We need to understand that the "ultimate initiation" involves ridding ourselves of the innate views of separation and supremacy. Living our Buddha Nature is the real meaning of the "completion stage." Helping others see their Buddha Nature is "the ultimate attainment," and universal enlightenment is the "great sublime attainment."

The motivation, then, is that we want others to be enlightened, and therefore we must manifest our own Buddha Nature. The Mahayana is the Great Vehicle, not because it is grandiose, but because its goal is great: universal enlightenment. No one is left out. The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are in the world but not of the world. In the same way, one who is enlightened may be physically "here" but is not here because samsara is not a location. It is a mental state.

Ordinary sentient beings can change their mental states, but the fundamental mental state of suffering and struggle in samsara remains, and sentient beings are always involved in it. That will not change. What will and can change is the quality of the experience of that sentient being who is recovering her Buddha Nature. The suffering and struggle will be significantly reduced and even eliminated. Many Bodhisattvas, particularly those who attain the full manifestation of their Buddha Nature in this realm, will return to this realm to help others.

This text is central to our lineage. It is definitive. It makes clear what we are called to do. It is very much the mission statement of the Jonang. This is the essence, and we should make an effort to understand it deeply. Because it is so central, it will really help us to contemplate this passage.

We need to aspire to be ultimate disciples, regardless of where we find ourselves now. We need to be honest and assess where we are in terms of our maturity, tendency, and capacity. During the Three Gates Meditation, which is our daily basic practice, we receive the Four Empowerments. A long time ago, our Lamas condensed the practice of the Six Vajra Yogas, and because there is no harm and in fact great benefit in giving these empowerments to everyone, they were integrated into our regular practice.

Unfortunately, in many lineages the empowerments have become not only ritualized but superstitious. Some people erroneously think that they have acquired something mysteriously powerful and magical by receiving an empowerment, but the ritual alone means very little. Purification must be cultivated. The empowerment must be acted upon, manifested. An initiation is the beginning of purification, which only ripens with cultivation. When we practice the Three Gates Meditation by ourselves or in a group, we are renewing, strengthening, and deepening the four purifications. This is true meditation. This is the true completion stage.

The Jonang are known for the completion stage of the Kalachakra, and my Lama often said that Three Gates Meditation is enough, more than enough, to embody this completion. The name Three Gates, on one level, refers to the gates of the body, speech, and mind. But it is also Three Gates in that it purifies the gross, subtle, and very subtle obscurations. The gross refers to unwholesome actions, the subtle to afflicted emotions, and the very subtle to wrong views. On the ultimate level, the practice grants access to the Nirmanakaya, Sambhogakaya, and Dharmakaya, or the Buddha forms of compassion, power, and wisdom. (See Appendix for Three Gates explanation and instruction)

We must understand the meaning of practice. There is formal practice, which is what most people focus on: sitting for meditation or recitation. That is practice in the sense of "practicing for." It is a dress rehearsal. We are going through the script, but the audience is not there. Then there is the everyday practice, which is the full show with the audience present. They have paid dearly to see us. They are in samsara to see us. The ultimate test, the ultimate practice is how we treat others. The proof of a good meditation is that we are kinder, more compassionate, and rejoice in the virtue of others. That is why the Buddha spoke of Right Meditation. Some meditations are not right; they are just escapes.

There are very ritualistically inclined practitioners, especially with an emphasis on visualization, who create an imaginary pure world, and when they come down from that, ordinary people and everyday life are difficult to cope with. There is a saying attributed to Ch'ing-yuan Wei-hsin:

> *Before a man studies Zen, to him mountains are mountains and waters are waters; after he gets an insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, mountains to him are not mountains and waters are not waters; but after this when he really attains to the abode of rest, mountains are once more mountains and waters are waters.*

In the beginning, it is common to fabricate all these conceptual understandings, but eventually we see beyond that. It is perfectly good to deal with the mountains as just mountains. We must remain grounded. The meditation practice is to ground us, not to throw us into an alternate universe from which we come down to judge others.

We must never think that we are above others. Any unwholesomeness of which others are capable, we are capable also. One of the fundamental meanings of Dharma is "that which holds." It holds us because any of us can fly off the handle at any moment. All sentient beings in this realm are born with a dominant afflicted emotion: attachment; aversion; indifference; pride; and jealousy. We all have all of them, but usually one is dominant in our personality. As practitioners, we may be overcoming those corruptions, but those tendencies are still there, and we must be careful. That is why it is necessary to keep practicing as much as possible and to remain in the company of the Sangha. It is very easy to succumb to the influences of society.

All of us are inherently ultimate disciples. We have received the ultimate initiation, we have the full actuality of the ultimate realization of Buddha Nature, and we are capable of bringing every sentient being to enlightenment. That is the good news.

FORTY-ONE

I bow to you who teach that the ultimate assembly is sublime natural luminosity, the ultimate meditational deity is the body of the primordial awareness of bliss and emptiness, the ultimate seal is the great seal of luminosity, and the ultimate mantra protects the mind.

Sometimes the term "assembly" means Sangha, but not in this context. Assembly here is a translation for *mandala*, meaning the retinue or the company of a particular Buddha aspect. Mandalas usually have a central figure, who is the main Buddha aspect of that representation, and then He or She is surrounded by many other Buddha aspects. Dolpopa says that the "ultimate assembly" or accompaniment to the central Buddha aspect is "natural luminosity." That main Buddha aspect is the Dharmakaya, the Body of Truth. It is undifferentiated and thus is closely identified with emptiness —not of qualities, but of distinctive characteristics. The Dharmakaya is ALL Buddhas, and He or She is at the center of this mandala or retinue. This undifferentiated primordial Buddha is surrounded by luminosity, which means appearance. This primordial, undifferentiated Buddha manifests as all the Buddha aspects. The "ultimate assembly is sublime natural luminosity" because there is no elaboration or fabrication. It is ultimate, sublime, and natural. It is natural for that undifferentiated primordial Buddha to manifest all these luminous forms.

Dolpopa continues, referring to the ultimate deity, the central image in the mandala, which is "the body of the primordial awareness of bliss and emptiness." He began with the retinue of the mandala on the periphery and is moving in. He is further describing the Dharmakaya as the "primordial awareness of bliss and emptiness." Bliss and emptiness are the absolute basis for the manifestation of all the Buddha forms, activities, qualities, and realms. Awareness of bliss is permanent joy, and emptiness is the ultimate possibility. This emptiness is both True Purity and True Being, the fully established, the *svabhava*, the self-nature of reality. The nature of reality is the potential for everything to exist, and that potential is blissful. All forms are possible because of that central bliss-emptiness.

There are four supreme qualities in Other Emptiness, that which remains after everything false is removed: True Purity (the lack of all afflictions), True Being (non-dual existence), True Bliss (the joyful manifestation of all), and True Permanence (non-arising and non-ending). Out of these four, the central deity in the mandala is the "body of primordial awareness of bliss and emptiness." The central features of the Dharmakaya Buddha are True Purity, the emptiness aspect, and True Bliss, the joyful aspect. Those are the qualities. True Being and True Permanence are qualities of that manifestation of the ultimate assembly, which is natural luminosity.

"The ultimate seal is the great seal of luminosity." Seal here is a translation of the Sanskrit word, *mudra*, which is a difficult term because it means so many things. Its meaning here is "consort". A consort is not gendered but is the partner of a central mandala monarch. The relationship, however, is situational and can be inverted at any time. What Dolpopa says is that the ultimate consort of that central Dharmakaya Buddha is the "great seal of luminosity." In classical Vajrayana Buddhist symbology, the male aspect represents compassion, and the female represents wisdom. Here Dolpopa reverses the usual assignments, saying that the central deity or Buddha is primordial awareness, which is wisdom (qualified as the wisdom of bliss and emptiness), and the consort is the great seal of luminosity, which is an expression of compassion or skillful means. The consort is never away from the central deity of the mandala. They are always together. This Primordial Buddha is never separated from the manifestations of Buddhahood. Dolpopa shows that these roles are not fixed. They are understandings. They are something that we have imputed upon the absolute, and that is why he feels completely free to move these meanings around, because they are arbitrarily imposed by humans. Because we have no other way, we divide things up.

Most of the authors of these texts in the past have been male, and males have a certain gender perspective. The modern Western inclination is to assign wisdom or rationality to the male aspect and compassion to the female aspect; however, that has not always been the case. In early Christianity, wisdom was feminine: Sophia. The central cathedral of Orthodox Christianity is Hagia Sophia, Holy Wisdom. It is still there in Istanbul and contains a huge mosaic of the Madonna. Today it is covered with Muslim banners, but she is still there. What Dolpopa is saying is that these assignations can be looked at from different angles and perspectives. Anything that we can say in words is not vision; it is view. We can see, but when we speak of what we see, it is not the same as seeing. Language and terms mean different things to different people, including the speaker.

The ultimate seal is the great consort of luminosity, of manifestation, and "the ultimate mantra protects the mind." Dolpopa does not mean that there is one mantra that is ultimate. He says that the ultimate mantra is not a word or a fabricated sound. That mantra is the primordial, empty sound of wisdom and luminosity. Empty sound is a difficult concept for us. By empty, we mean that something is not conditioned, impermanent, insubstantial. The sound he is referring to is the sound that we represent as **HRIH**. This is the sound of Buddha Nature penetrating conventional reality. That is why Dolpopa says that the ultimate mantra protects the mind. The minds of sentient beings have the established tendency to go constantly circling in samsara with a centripetal energy that keeps us going and going around. Because of karma, we act, and there are consequences. Those consequences lead us to act again, and that act leads to consequences, which then become a cause, *ad infinitum*. This circling will continue without something to interrupt it.

It is, then, precisely, that union of bliss-emptiness, luminosity and compassion, that protects the mind. It is that ultimate mandala in which there is the Buddha Nature, the pure Truth Form of the Buddha, surrounded by all the truth formations of luminosity that protect the mind. It is not something that we artificially create. It is not even the Eightfold Noble Path. The Eightfold Noble Path is the result of Buddha Nature. Buddha Nature is not the result of the path. Buddha Nature precedes the path and all efforts on the path. Without Buddha Nature, we would not even want happiness. We would not want enlightenment. Even the desire to be free of suffering and to manifest Buddha Nature comes from Buddha Nature.

> *If Buddha Nature were not present, there would be no remorse over suffering; there would be no longing for nirvana, nor striving and devotion towards this aim. That with regard to existence and nirvana their respective fault and quality are seen —that suffering is seen as the defect of existence and happiness as the excellence of nirvana— stems from the presence of the disposition to Buddhahood.* —Maitreya, Uttaratantrasastra

This teaching is characteristic of the Jonang view. We do not claim to be the only ones who recognize the importance of Buddha Nature. What Dolpopa asserts in two of his major works, *The Fourth Council* and *Mountain Doctrine*, is that other lineages tend not to have full confidence in Buddha Nature. He explains that without that confidence, one can easily stray from the path, because it is Buddha Nature that guides us. "The ultimate mantra protects the mind." It is the action of that formless form, surrounded by all the forms of luminosity, it is that primordial Buddha manifested as Buddha Nature in every sentient being that protects the mind. Nothing else can do it. Unless we have full confidence in Buddha Nature, we will continue circling in samsara.

Everything that we do should always be based on confidence and certainty in Buddha Nature. That is why we can boldly make the affirmation that we can attain enlightenment in one body, in one lifetime. We can do it because it is already there. If something is already there, it is not difficult to find. We just must stop ignoring it. We just must stop looking through those veils of wrong views and afflicted emotions. The ultimate mantra is certainty of Buddha Nature.

In one of our prayers, we say, "*Reverence to the glorious Primordial Buddha, basis of all. Reverence to Buddha Nature, ground of non-dual purity*." Primordial Buddha is the Dharmakaya, basis of all. Buddha Nature is the Primordial Buddha within each sentient being afflicted by separation. That is the difference. There is no difference in quality. There is a difference in that one is not separate, and one is incidentally separated. Our Buddha Nature is covered, and Primordial Buddha is never covered. They are the same —one in a full state of manifestation and one covered. Asanga and Maitreya say that Buddha Nature manifested fully is a Buddha; Buddha Nature manifested partially is a Bodhisattva; and Buddha Nature obscured is a sentient being —the same, but in three modes of manifestation.

The sound of **HRIH**, the seed mantra of our own Buddha Nature, is always present. During mediation, when we rest in the empty luminosity, we look forward with our eyes closed and listen for that sound. The sound may appear to move, but we do not follow the movement. It is not the sound, but the mind that moves, trying to get an angle on the sound. There may also appear an empty form, which is a luminous appearance. It is a very common occurrence to see different manifestations of light during meditation. If we do see them, we do not follow them. The light does not move; it is the mind moving. To rest in the empty luminosity is to rest in the empty sound and empty form, which is the light. This light is often referred to as the blue sun or the blue pearl (portrayed in Chinese iconography as the treasure pearl of a dragon).

Ten forms of light manifestation are mentioned in Tibetan Buddhism, but the Tibetan view of light is very different from ours. They speak of fireflies and sparks and butter lamps and moons and blue suns. But it is basically just a manifestation of light. How it manifests for us specifically is not necessarily the same. Instead of following concepts, it is the sound and the light that are the focus. We do not go looking for either. That is one of the reasons why we do not engage in visualization. There is no need, because the light and sound are already there. Nothing needs to be created. At the time of death, every sentient being hears that sound and sees that light, but very few recognize them and therefore continue in the cycle. All our prayers and practices are directed at recognizing that sound and light, because the moment we recognize them, that is enlightenment.

In much the same way as humans have various names and appellations, Amideva, the Buddha of Boundless Radiance, our own Buddha Nature, is also known as Amitabha, Boundless Light, and Amitayus, Boundless Life.

Of the 48 Vows made by Amideva in the Greater Sukhavati Sutra, the 12th is the Vow of Boundless Light:

> *If, when I attain Buddhahood, my light should be limited, unable to illuminate at least a hundred thousand kotis of nayutas of Buddha-lands, may I not attain Perfect Enlightenment.*

The 13th is the Vow of Boundless Life:

> *If, when I attain Buddhahood, my lifespan should be limited, even to the extent of a hundred thousand kotis of nayutas of kalpas, may I not attain Perfect Enlightenment.*

A *koti* is approximately 10,000,000 and a *nayuta* is 100,000,000,000, so "a hundred thousand *kotis* of *nayutas*" is an inconceivably large number. These vast figures are meant to impress upon us that the Buddha's light and life are limitless.

In these two vows, Amideva pledges to attain Buddhahood and forever deliver sentient beings of the three times (past, present and future) through His Boundless Life, exemplifying relentless compassion, and the ten directions through His Boundless Light, encompassing inconceivable wisdom. His life and light are all-pervasive and limitless.

Amideva, Boundless Radiance of Light and Life, skillfully delivers and receives afflicted sentient beings from the ten directions with his great wisdom and compassion, as promised in His 18th Vow.

> *If, when I attain Buddhahood, sentient beings of the ten quarters who sincerely and joyfully entrust themselves to me, desire to be born in my Pure Land, and call my Name even ten times, should not be born there, may I not attain Perfect Enlightenment.*

This teaching represents a view, not a vision. But the viewpoints to the vision. That is the greatness of the first component of the Eightfold Noble Path, Right View. The view is not there to be accepted as dogma, but to point the way. It is a path, and the first thing that we need on a path is for someone to say, "That way." The clearer the view, the fewer problems we find along the way.

One essential lesson to know when we embark on this path is that we are already there. That is great news. Most of us have this wrong view that we are not going to make it. Enlightenment seems so far. But what our teachers are saying constantly is that we are already there. Buddha Nature is not a potential. It is an actuality. Buddha Nature is not a sample of Buddhahood; it is the entire Buddhahood. It is just momentarily covered.

> *The eye cannot see itself […], but bring forth a mirror, and the eye will see itself. This is none other than the power of the mirror.*
> *This mirror is called "great, perfect mirror wisdom," which sentient beings possess originally. It is the Name that all Buddhas have themselves realized.*
> *In the mirror of the Name, we can see our original face.* —Ippen Shonin

FORTY-TWO

I bow to you who teach the complete, ultimate Dharma of the ultimate ground as thusness with stains, the ultimate path as the Six-Branch Vajra Yoga, and the ultimate result as the thusness of the separated result.

This text specifically addresses Jonang view and practice. The "complete, ultimate Dharma," is that Dharma that accepts and includes all three cycles of the Wheel of Dharma. To review, the cycles of the Wheel of Dharma are not chronological divisions of the historical Buddha's teaching, but rather are topical groupings, which the Buddha spoke according to the audience present. Dolpopa said many times that one must teach according to the maturity, capacity, and inclination of the student. Depending on His audience's level, the Buddha spoke the various cycles of the Wheel of Dharma.

The first turning is usually referred to as the Four Noble Truths, but more specifically it is the cycle in which He discusses cause and effect: karma. This basis is crucial to any progress. The teaching on karma is the teaching on responsibility. We are responsible not only for our words, thoughts, and deeds, but for their consequences as well. The second turning of the Wheel of Dharma, which is more interior, is often referred to as the Wheel of No Characteristics. Here the Buddha explains that all characteristics that we perceive in objects (beings, situations, inanimate things) are imputed or projected from our side. The qualities are not inherent in the object. They are not aspects of the object perceived. If we do not understand this, we will go through life believing that our perceptions are the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The only thing accessible to us is our experience. We know no inherent characteristics of anything. The first component of the Eightfold Noble Path is not called Right Truth, it is called Right View. From the outset we acknowledge that what can be stated is merely a view, not a full account of the absolute truth.

The true nature of things, whatever it may be, is inaccessible to us at this time. Our perception is simply how we see things, not how things are. We cannot stand outside of ourselves to see how things are in themselves. That is not to question or deny the existence of anything; it is not to question or deny that things may or may not have inherent characteristics. It means that no human being can know what they actually are or are not. The Buddha specifically refused to answer ontological questions. Such questions are but "a thicket of theoretical views, a wilderness of theoretical views, a contortion of theoretical views, a vacillation of theoretical views, and a bondage of theoretical views." When asked questions of that sort, He refused to answer because they "do not lead to renunciation, to dispassion, to cessation of suffering, to calming, to higher knowledge, to awakening, or to nirvana." He repeatedly asserted that He taught only suffering and the cessation of suffering.

The third turning is the Wheel of Buddha Nature, the Wheel of the Truly Established, the Wheel of Buddhahood, the Wheel of Enlightenment. It is the explanation and teaching that the Buddha gave on the ground, the path, and the fruit. These three are the complete, ultimate Dharma, and Buddha Nature is the basis of all three. If we did not have Buddha Nature, we would not be motivated to manifest it. If we were not motivated to manifest it, we never would make efforts. Buddha Nature is the ground, it is the path, and it is the fruit.

"Thusness" (also rendered "Suchness" and "Thatness"), is an attempt to say, "things as they truly are". In ordinary beings thusness is covered with stains. "The ultimate path," which allows us to abandon those stains, is the Six-Branch Vajra Yoga. The Six-Branch Vajra Yoga is the distinctive practice of the Jonang. It is not six different methods, but one unified practice where we withdraw from those stains and concentrate on, recall, manifest, and abide in Buddha Nature. "The ultimate result," is this same Buddha Nature, separated from the stains.

Vajra Yoga consists of the branches of Withdrawal, severing attachment to phenomenal perception; Concentration, uniting emptiness and luminosity; Interiorization, drawing the vital force into the central channel; Retention, uniting the vital force and pure form; Recollection, manifesting immutable bliss and pure form; and Stabilization, merging with the enlightened body.

In the first of the six branches, we withdraw our attention from external stimulation, that is, from the imaginary or constructed nature (*parikalpita*) that we project onto reality. In the second, we spontaneously and directly perceive the nature of the mind, realizing the characteristics and functions of the dependent nature (*paratantra*). In the third, we draw the life force into the central channel and focus awareness on wisdom energy (*jnanavayu*) spontaneously and directly perceiving the fully established nature (*parinishpanna*), which is non-different from True Purity.

In the fourth branch, we spontaneously and directly perceive the Dharmakaya, the Buddha Form of Truth, True Being. In the fifth, we spontaneously and directly manifest the Sambhogakaya, the Buddha Form of Glory, True Bliss. In the sixth, we spontaneously and directly manifest the Nirmanakaya, the Buddha Body of Compassion, True Permanence. Thus, are all stains removed, and Buddha Nature fully manifests.

Three Gates Meditation is a gift from our Lamas so that we, who live in such agitated times, can attain the same result as they once did in the peace of remote mountain monasteries, practicing the Six-Branch Vajra Yoga. The six branches are all present in our Three Gates Meditation. When our Lamas developed this method for our time and circumstance, they imbued it, they charged it with their merit. This is not a supernatural act. They imbued the method with power by testing it, practicing it, attaining the result of the practice, and transmitting it to us.

What are the stains? There are only two: wrong views and afflicted emotions. That is all that separates us from the full manifestation of Buddha Nature. This is the core teaching of the Jonang. There are other lineages that make similar statements, but perhaps not as boldly or with such certainty: there is nothing to build or add or create. Buddha Nature is fully, completely present. It is not a seed or a potential or a promise or a glimpse; it is the full, complete, perfect awakening with all enlightened qualities. It is the perfect Buddha forms, Buddha qualities, Buddha activities, and Buddha realms. They are veiled but present, and there are many metaphors that illuminate this truth: the unborn universal monarch in the womb of a destitute woman, a hidden treasure under the home of a beggar, a golden statue covered in rags... The rags may be dirty and ugly, but the golden statue beneath is unchanged by the rags.

Buddha Nature is being. Being is process, verb —not a thing, not an entity. It happens, but there is no *thing* that happens. It is process only, never a separate entity. We will never find a finalized Buddha in ourselves or in anyone else. When we speak of complete, perfect enlightenment, we are not referring to something that is an “it,” an endpoint, done, accomplished, finished. We say there is “being enlightened.” There are no enlightened beings (entities); there is only enlightened action. We have enlightened moments. Everything is; there isn’t some “thing” that is accomplished. Once we say that anything is complete, we are saying that it has boundaries; we are setting limits. When we say something is or is not, both are fixed, static concepts. We do not apply such concepts to the existence or non-existence of Buddha Nature. If there is any ontology in Buddhism, it is the ontology of experience. There is nothing but experience.

We are trying to say in human language what is beyond words, beyond concepts. Words and their meanings are a finger pointing to the moon, but they are not the moon. The words that we use to speak of Buddha Nature are the finger pointing to the moon, but are not Buddha Nature. Buddha Nature is inexpressible. Maitreya, Asanga, Vasubandhu, and Dolpopa clearly state that they use words to express the inexpressible. Let us not fall into the trap of saying that all designations are false except those we

use to designate ultimate reality. They are also, at best, approximations, and if we take them literally, we fall into a trap.

> *Uncreated and spontaneously present, never due to extraneous conditions, wielding knowledge, compassionate love, and power, Buddhahood has the qualities of the two benefits.*
>
> *Its nature is without beginning, middle, or end; hence Buddhahood is uncreated. Since it possesses the peaceful* Dharmakaya*, it is spontaneously present. Since it must be realized through self-awareness, it is not due to extraneous conditions.* —Maitreya

When Dolpopa says that "the ultimate result" is "the thusness of the separated result," he wants to make sure that we do not fall into thinking, "Oh, now he has said what it is." No one can say what it is. The entirety of reality does not fit into the human mind, and words are a small part of the human mind. How are we going to fit infinity into something that is finite? How do we measure the immeasurable? Thusness is understood as "things as they are," separated from wrong views and afflicted emotions. We cannot get any closer to stating what it is. It is easier to say what it is not. That is why Dolpopa constantly says that the path is one of purification, of abandoning wrong views and afflicted emotions. It is not a path of cobbling enlightenment together.

Enlightenment is a separated result; it is not a produced result. We can understand this statement through an analogy. What is muddy water? It is water mixed with dirt. Now if we allow the dirt to settle, the water does not look muddy anymore. That happens with rivers: when it rains the rivers look muddy, but then a few days later they look clear. Has the nature of the water changed? The nature of the water stays the same, whether there is dirt or no dirt, whether dirt is mixed with the water or lying on the river bed. Water is always H_20. The water was temporarily and incidentally accompanied by dirt. Dirt is not part of the composition of water. When dirt is separated from water, the separated result is clarity. Clarity is not produced by an external cause. It is not a produced result.

Our "dirt" is the combination of wrong views and afflicted emotions, and it is agitation, like that in a river, that causes mixing with the mind. Agitation takes three forms: attachment, aversion, and indifference. It is easy to understand how attachment and aversion agitate the mind, but we cannot forget indifference. We can be so preoccupied with what we want and don't want that we do not care about how other sentient beings are suffering; we don't have time for them. We fall into a state of indifference when we are so attached and so averse that we have no mental space for anything else. Attachment and aversion can consume our mental energy to the point that nothing else matters.

We may think we have enough suffering, so why should we bother to look at the suffering of others? When we only focus on our own suffering, we magnify it. We zoom in and it becomes bigger and bigger. We need perspective. Dolpopa tells us that the more we do to alleviate the suffering of others, the more we alleviate our own. We can understand our own suffering better, not by zooming in and being self-absorbed, which unnaturally magnifies, but by using others as a mirror. To look at ourselves, we must use a mirror. In the same way, when we see the suffering of others, we begin to understand our own suffering. Ultimately separation is false. Others are not disconnected from us; their suffering and happiness are also ours. Family physicians who treat many people with chronic conditions find that those who volunteer to help others feel much better. Those who are self-absorbed suffer more, because the natural tendency of the mind is to zoom in and magnify. When we act to reduce the suffering of others, we reduce our own.

All three afflicted emotions agitate the mind and make us suffer. Suffering, the First Noble Truth, is very important. Sadly, with few exceptions, until our own suffering becomes acute, we do not look for a solution. If we do not have a problem, or think we do not have a problem, we will not fix it. The word

"Right" in the Eightfold Noble Path is indicative of direction. In every situation, what is the right way to go? We can move towards the removal of stains or towards the accumulation of stains. We can deepen our ignorance at every step, or we can add wisdom and compassion at every step. As the Buddha said,

> *Drop by drop is the water pot filled. Likewise, the wise, gathering it little by little, fill themselves with good.*

We all have strong karmic causes called tendencies. The causes can be there, but if the conditions are not suitable, karma lies dormant. Conditions are easier to control than causes. If we see a certain negative tendency in ourselves, it is wise to avoid the conditions that trigger it and make it flourish. If we are, for example, accident prone, we need to make sure that we are more careful than others. Ordinary caution is not enough for us. If we are alcoholics, is it easier to control the cause or the conditions? If we understand that the cause is strong, we can avoid the conditions of walking into a bar or keeping liquor at home. We must modify the conditions to encourage positive tendencies and discourage negative ones. Through this process, we are moving away from the accumulation of stains.

The "ultimate result" when we complete the path is the same thing we began with, thusness, now separated from the stains. The ultimate result is Buddha Nature separated from wrong views and afflicted emotions. The stains distort our Nature, but when cleansed, it is no longer distorted. During the period of the path, looking at suffering and the causes of suffering is absolutely necessary. We cannot just say that suffering and the causes of suffering are ultimately unreal. They are like nightmares, and although nightmares are not ultimately real, while we are experiencing them, we are really scared. A nightmare can give us a heart attack, and we must address it; that is the path.

The last line of this text refers to the "ultimate result" in which the nightmare is gone. My Lama always said that the path is gradual, but enlightenment is sudden. We get there gradually, but when it happens, it happens suddenly, like flipping the light switch in a dark room. It may take a while to find that switch, but once we flip it, the illumination is sudden and complete. Enlightenment is stringing together as many of those enlightened moments as possible, in as many "rooms" (situations) as possible. We can do this; it is not far-fetched. The core teaching, original enlightenment, is that we are already Buddha with all the qualities, we just need to remove the stains.

> *The* Dharmakaya *is free from thoughts. The characteristic of that which is free from thoughts is like the sphere of empty space that pervades everywhere. The absolute aspect of reality (*dharmadhatu*) is none other than the undifferentiated* Dharmakaya*, the Truth Form of the Tathagata.*
>
> *Since the* Dharmakaya *is the Truth Form, it is called original enlightenment. Why? Because original enlightenment indicates the essence of being in contradistinction to being in the process of actualization of enlightenment. The process of actualization of enlightenment is none other than the process of integrating the identity with the original enlightenment.*
> —Asvaghosha, *Mahayanashraddhotpadashastra*

This teaching is absolutely essential; if we do not understand Buddha Nature, we will always be afflicted with doubt, uncertainty, and paralysis on the path, because enlightenment will seem so difficult and distant. We tend to think of enlightenment as some heroic achievement and cannot see ourselves in the role of the hero. However, that hero is in every one of us. We are that hero, that Bodhisattva. This body is not who we are. This ordinary mind is not who we are. These limitations are not who we are. We can recognize our true identity. We are the Truth Form, the *Dharmakaya*. That is our essence.

> *The extremely profound intention is precisely the supreme truth (paramarthasatya). The supreme truth is precisely the quintessence of beings (sattvadhātu). The quintessence of beings is*

precisely Buddha Nature (tathāgatagarbha). Buddha Nature is precisely the Form of Truth (dharmakāya). […]

Therefore, not separate from the quintessence of beings is the Form of Truth. Not separate from the Form of Truth is the quintessence of beings. The quintessence of beings is precisely the Form of Truth. The Form of Truth is precisely the quintessence of beings.
— Buddha Shakyamuni, Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśaparivarta Sutra

FORTY-THREE — FORTY-FOUR

By this virtue, may I and all sentient beings actualize the separated result of the absolute Truth Form, and with the produced result of the two Relative Forms, work for the benefit of others for the duration of cyclic existence.

For as long as that has not been achieved, by means of the Three Wheels in sequence and especially the Swift Path, may I always be enthusiastic in cleansing in succession the stains on the Buddha Essence in myself and others. May all be auspicious!

We have come to the final two verses of The Handbook, written by Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen, our Grand Root Lama. These verses constitute the dedication, but also include some very important teachings.

"By this virtue," refers to the virtue we have accomplished by reciting, studying, contemplating, understanding, integrating, and practicing the teachings presented in The Handbook. "May I and all sentient beings" utilizes a significant grammatical arrangement. The polite way is to place others before oneself. However, in Buddhist prayers, we usually mention ourselves first because we cannot give or wish for others what we do not have or wish for ourselves, and because we fully accept the responsibility for our mental, verbal, and physical acts. We also recognize that our perspective, no matter how dedicated to the wellbeing of others, is always our perspective. If we are praying, we necessarily have a concept of "I." So, this grammatical choice is a way of recognizing reality.

"Actualize" means to manifest fully "the separated result of the absolute Truth Form." This sounds complicated, but it is not. "Separated" here means detached from wrong views and afflicted emotions. This is a path of separation from error, not of construction, because Buddha Nature is already present — full and complete. "The Absolute Truth Form" is the *Dharmakaya*. The Truth Form is not actually a form. It is formless form, meaning just Truth: Buddha Essence as it is. Truth is not static and has no aspects that can be analyzed. It is ineffable, meaning nothing can be said of it that is absolutely true. In the Truth Form there is no separation, so there is no consciousness, as consciousness always implies consciousness of something, duality. Therefore, the Truth Form is beyond consciousness. It is non-dual but not unitary. It is not two, but we are not saying it is one.

What is the difference between the "produced" and the "separated" result? The separated result is not created or produced; it has always been there. A produced result, as the term implies, is generated by causes and conditions. While all who attain enlightenment attain the separated result of the absolute Truth Form, all Buddhas also have produced results according to their specific path to enlightenment. They produce two relative forms, the *Sambhogakaya*, and the *Nirmanakaya*, or the form of glory and the form of manifest compassion. These two forms are produced.

The Buddha Shakyamuni's Truth Form is the same as that of all the Buddhas who have ever been and will ever be. But His manifestation is particular, specific. He was born and preached and lived and died in a particular place, in a particular body, at a particular time. That is a produced form. It is the result of causes and conditions, of His specific path to manifestation and enlightenment. All of us who attain complete enlightenment will have, because we already possess it, the same ultimate Truth Form, but we will all have different relative forms. These account for the Buddhas manifesting different aspects. One Buddha may manifest apparently more wisdom or compassion or inclination to help a certain group of sentient beings.

Because of our karma, we are unable to perceive the Truth Form, so depending on our level of spiritual attainment, we can perceive the *Sambhogakaya* and the *Nirmanakaya*, which are visible but not perceptible to all. While the historical Buddha was on this planet, everyone could see and hear Him, but there is a difference between physically seeing Him and seeing Him as a Buddha. His own cousin,

Devadatta, saw Him basically as a competitor. Some of the Buddha's disciples saw the Truth Form in Him. Some of them saw the Form of Power. Some of them heard certain sutras that others did not hear. Some who were present had no clue; they could not hear or see. Our karma determines which aspect of the Buddha, if any, that we can actually see. Most of the Mahayana sutras are delivered by the form of glory, the *Sambhogakaya*, of the Buddha.

Also, much depends on the trajectory of a particular Buddha. It is Shakyamuni's trajectory that He chose to make this planet His *buddhakshetra*, His Realm. In the scriptures, we read that other Buddhas and Great Bodhisattvas told Him not to waste His time in this realm, when the historical Buddha was contemplating taking a relative form. We think of the age of the Buddha as pure, and it certainly was, compared to today. But the Buddha came into the age of the five corruptions. This is not the best neighborhood of the universe and has not been for a very long time.

The two relative forms of the Buddha are more contextual than the absolute Truth Form, which is unproduced and independent of all causes and conditions. These two relative forms "work for the benefit of others for the duration of cyclic existence." In other words, there is a relationship between the relative forms and sentient beings. The *Sambhogakaya* or power forms are visible to the Bodhisattvas who have not yet reached complete, perfect enlightenment. The *Nirmanakaya* or the manifest forms are visible to ordinary sentient beings. As long as there are Bodhisattvas and ordinary beings, those two forms are present. These two relative forms "work for the benefit of others for the duration of cyclic existence;" they exist as long as there is a need for them.

These forms are a response to *samsara*. When we speak of ordinary cause and effect, the effect cannot choose not to manifest, but the Buddhas can choose not to manifest. They do choose to manifest, however, and the cause is compassion. They appear for our benefit, but we do not create them. However, we do create our perception of them, which sometimes is confused with actually creating them. The Tibetan iconography reveals how Tibetans perceive the relative forms of the Buddha. My Lama said that when there are enough Westerners of a high level of realization, we will begin to see how people of this culture perceive the Buddhas, and it may not look at all like the Tibetan perception. The Chinese, Japanese, and Indians all see the Buddhas according to their cultures. We must differentiate between the produced forms as they truly are and the produced forms as we see them. At some point, we will all see the produced forms of the Buddhas.

"They will work for the benefit of others for the duration of cyclic existence." Is cyclic existence eternal? Yes and no. It ends for individual sentient beings who attain perfect enlightenment. But for those who have not attained perfect enlightenment yet, it goes on. Therefore, it both ends and continues. Since time is a mental construct, can we say that time will end? As long as sentient beings experience time as real, it will be true for them. Ultimately, *samsara* will end because it is not real. All sentient beings will attain complete perfect enlightenment. When? That question has no answer because time does not exist.

"For as long as that has not been achieved," refers to the actualization, our own manifestation of the Truth Form and the Relative Forms. Each one of us will have these forms. Unbeknownst to us, in meditation we are manifesting the Three Forms. When we meditate, we re-enact the enlightenment of the Buddha Shakyamuni for the benefit of all sentient beings. At this stage, we only do this for the duration of our meditation practice, but we are working towards being able to manifest our Buddha forms all the time.

"By means of the Three Wheels in sequence and especially the Swift Path, may I always be enthusiastic in cleansing in succession the stains on the Buddha Essence in myself and others." As long as we have not yet achieved complete enlightenment and permanently manifested the Truth Form, the Form of

Power, and the Form of Compassion, we must practice the Eightfold Noble Path. We must practice because there is no difference between practicing and being. Being is practice. That is all it is. What is the difference between the historical Buddha and any of us? The difference is that we lapse into attachment, aversion, and indifference, and He did not. It is all about doing. It is not about shining or levitating. To say that the Buddha shone is a way of saying that He never deviated from pure conduct. Until we have attained that spontaneously, we must do it intentionally.

Dolpopa prayed:

> *May I teach the Dharma in all my lifetimes.*
> *If unable to teach the Dharma,*
> *may I bear the great responsibility of upholding it.*
> *If unable to uphold the Dharma,*
> *may I stand watch with concern for the doctrine*
> *and fear for the decline of the Dharma.*
> *May I remove all the suffering*
> *of all infinite beings, my parents.*
> *If unable to remove all their suffering,*
> *may I be their companion in suffering.*

The Three Wheels in sequence begin with the renunciation of illusion, wrong view, and wrong conduct. They continue with understanding reality as the three natures: the imaginary (appearances), the dependent (cause and effect), and the truly established (Buddha Nature). The Swift Path is the path that takes the fruit, the ultimate Buddha Essence, as its foundation, its manifestation, its own fruit. "Enthusiastic" is a good word here. This path of practice is not a chore. Enthusiasm cannot be fabricated. It is a state in which we recognize that this path is so beneficial that we want it for ourselves and others.

"Cleansing in succession" refers to refraining from negative acts; next, eliminating afflicted emotions; and lastly, separating from wrong views. The helpful analogy is that there is a gem that has a near layer of filth (wrong view), surrounded by a second layer of muck (afflicted emotions), encircled by a third layer of grime (negative karma). We must begin cleaning it from the outside in. The layer closest to the gem is not accessible immediately, so we begin by addressing our karma and restraining ourselves, using the Five Precepts as a guide. We cannot tackle the afflicted emotions without stopping what strengthens them constantly. As long as we are stealing, killing, lying, abusing other sentient beings, and getting intoxicated so that we do those things without compunction, how can we claim that we are dealing with our afflicted emotions?

It hurts when we see people claim to be cultivating compassion when their lives are filled with tramping on other sentient beings. Human history is full of that. "In the name of the God of love, let's go on a crusade, on a holy war, on an inquisition, on a killing rampage!" So, we begin with karma, with conduct, and work our way towards the muck of our afflicted emotions and the filth of wrong views. That insight is one of Dolpopa's greatest contributions. Do not think or believe for a second that we can sit on a cushion and fix everything that needs fixing without changing our lives. Buddhism is practice.

The night that my Lama passed away, I dreamt of him opening the door to the room in which I was sleeping. He only spoke one word, "Practice," and closed the door. As the years go by, I am more and more convinced that he was giving me a summary of the entire view, meditation, and conduct of Buddhism; it is all practice. There is nothing else but practice. View is a way of seeing the world; it is action. Meditation is a way of cultivating the view; it is action. Conduct is a way of manifesting that view; it is action. It is all practice. There is nothing else, and that is what Dolpopa says here: "*May I always be*

enthusiastic in cleansing in succession the stains [wrong views, afflicted emotions, and harmful conduct] on the Buddha Essence in myself and others."

Once we remove the stains, what remains is True Purity, True Being, True Bliss, and True Permanence. That is Buddha Essence. Do not forget that the Mahayana path is not about escaping samsara by ourselves. It is about all of us, "in myself and others," because ultimately there is no separation. As long as there is one sentient being in this nightmare, we are all in the nightmare.

May all be auspicious. The ultimate teaching is practice, enthusiastic practice. Today is an opportunity to practice. That opportunity is everywhere, at all times, and in all situations. We can manifest the Three Forms: the separated result, the Truth Form, and the produced results, the Forms of Power and Compassion. We can help every single sentient being, including ourselves. That is auspicious.

mangalam

NAMO GURAVE

Reverence to the Glorious Lama,
Quintessence of the Three Bodies, Crown Jewel of the Pure Lineage,
Leader of sentient beings, Revealer of the ultimate path,
the Lord of Refuge, the Regent of the Buddha,
of peerless kindness, incomparable Teacher,
Victory Banner of Wisdom of the Great Middle Way.
Omniscient Jonangpa, please hear my prayer!

The entire sphere of objects of knowledge
is pervaded by a single moment of your wisdom,
apprehending whatever exists as existing,
and whatever does not exist as not existing.

I pray to you, please look upon me with compassion.
Please empower me with your blessings.
Please grant me the two accomplishments.
Please bestow the fruit of the effortless establishment
of the two purposes.

Buddha of the Three Times, my precious Lama,
Primordial Monarch of the Peacock Throne,
Victory Banner of Wisdom of the Great Middle Way,
Omniscient Jonangpa, please look upon me with compassion!

May I know all appearances are vanity.
May I know that I dream while dreaming.
May I know that I die while dying.
According to Your Promise, may I be born with You in Dewachen.

All notions of subject and object, self and selves,
phenomena and characteristics,
are mere transformations of consciousness only.
By this truth, may all sentient beings everywhere hear the Holy Name,
awaken to the Boundless Radiance,
and spontaneously arise in Dewachen.

May these pure wishes be fulfilled
through the Truth of the Three Jewels;
the great might of Your Promise;
the blessings of the Bodhisattva of Compassion;
the tireless activity of the Protector, the Mother of Clear Light;
my vigorous prayers of definitive aspiration;
and the virtue of all holy and ordinary beings.

LAMA CHENNO LAMA CHENNO LAMA CHENNO

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