

An Interview with His Holiness Sakya Trizin
A Buddhist Essence Teaching

**In Commemoration of
His Holiness Sakya Trizin's Visit
to South-East Asia 1984**

PART ONE

“WE MADE MANY PREDICTIONS AND THEY ALL SAID THE SAME THING”

Q. Your Holiness, would you give us an account of your life?

A. Perhaps I should begin by telling you what happened before my birth. The title 'Sakya Trizin' means 'Holder of the Throne of Sakya' and my grandfather had been the last Trizin in our family. For the sake of having a son, my parents went on a pilgrimage to Mount Kailash, Nepal, to Lhasa, and to South Tibet, but there was never any sign that a son might be born. They had given up all hope when they reached Nalanda Monastery, an important Sakya Monastery north of Lhasa and told the monasteries' abbots of this. The leaders were shocked and very worried, as our family lineage, the Dolma Palace line, held the tradition of the most esoteric Sakya teachings and moreover, most of the heads of the monastery had received these teachings from my grandfather, so to them, the continuation of our family was most important. They urged my parents not to give up hope, and moreover they gave up one of their best teachers, Lama Ngawang Lodro Rinchen, so that he could travel with my parents. This was something of a loss to the monastery, but he was a powerful Lama who could perform all the different rituals, and in particular, his prayers had caused children to be born to women who had been unable to have children before. After this he always traveled with my father, and together they performed many rituals and prayed for a son to be born. At last it became clear that the prayers had been answered and my parents halted at Tsedong, a small, pleasant town near Shigatse. It had been decided that it was a good place for a child to be born, partly perhaps for its reputation as the birthplace of many great Sakya teachers such as Ngachang Chenpo and Ngawang Kunga Rinchen. In fact, I was born in the same room as Ngachang Chenpo.

A further problem arose: a succession of astrologically inauspicious days. As my parents wanted me to be born on an auspicious day, many more prayers were said. And I was not born on a bad day; I was born on the first day of the eighth Tibetan month (September 7, 1945), which was considered quite good. It is said that rainbows were seen over our house, and that an image of Guru Rinpoche was then offered to my father, which were good signs, but of course I didn't know anything of this.

Q. What happens when a child is born into Your Holiness' family?

A. The very first thing, as soon as the child is born, is that the letter *DHIH*, the letter of Manjusri, who represents speech and wisdom, is written on the child's tongue with a special nectar made of saffron and many other things.

Q. *When did you first go to Sakya?*

A. That was later. I am told that my first birthday was celebrated in Tsedong, and that after this, our family went on a short pilgrimage to the famous shrine of Guru Rinpoche in the south of Tibet. After that we returned to Sakya, where my second birthday was celebrated rather elaborately.

Q. *Your parents died when you were quite young, I think?*

A. Yes. I cannot remember my mother at all. She died when I was two or three but I remember her sister, my aunt. She was like a mother to me. My father died in 1950 when I was five. That I remember very well.

Q. *How old were you when your studies started?*

A. This was when I was five. In that same year, Lama Ngawang Lodro Rinchen gave me my first lesson in the alphabet. We went to the special Manjusri shrine in Sakya, where he gave me the consecrations of Manjusri and Achala, and then a very ancient copy of the Tibetan alphabet written in gold was produced. This was especially for the use of the sons of our family. Then Lama Ngawang read the letters in front of the Manjusri image and I repeated them after him. This, of course, was a ceremony. After that I had another teacher for reading.

Q. *Did your spiritual studies begin then too?*

A. Yes. I had to memorize and recite prayers to Manjusri. I remember all this very clearly. After the ceremony, I was taught spelling seven hours a day, six days a week for nearly two years. We Tibetans say that the more you practice spelling, the faster you will be able to read.

Q. *Were you receiving religious teaching at this time too?*

A. I had received consecrations frequently. In fact, I was told that I received the blessings of Amitayus for long life from my father almost as soon as I was born. When I was four, I received the Consecration of Vajrakilaya (Dorje Phurba) from my father. I remember that also very clearly. I was sitting in the lap of a dear personal attendant, and I remember, too, when my father gave me the wrathful part of the Consecration, he was wearing the hat and costume of a black hat dancer, and performed the ritual dances. I even remembered who played the musical instruments then!

Q. *Where did all this take place?*

A. In the Dolma Palace. The Dolma Palace is a big palace with three main shrine rooms and many other rooms. Altogether it has about eighty rooms, and all the teachings were given in one of these shrine rooms.

Q. *Did you ever go out of the palace?*

A. Oh yes, but not often into town. There was a very extensive open area of fields around the palace, and the river ran quite near. I used to go out there with an attendant to play with other children when I was not studying.

Q. *When did your religious studies begin in earnest?*

A. I began to study reading in the summer of 1950, and in the autumn, I went to Ngor Monastery where I received the Esoteric Path-Result (*Lamdre*) teaching. My Guru for this was Lama Ngawang Lodro Shenphen Nyingpo, Abbot of the Khangsar Abbacy of Ngor.

Q. *How do you remember him?*

A. He was a very holy, very spiritually advanced Lama, always very calm, very slow in movement, and he did everything very perfectly. He was then very old. He gave the teaching in his own room to a very few people, maybe thirty in all. At that time, I was very small and could barely read. I remember I sat in the lap of Khangsar Shabdrung, the successor to the Abbot, who held out the pages in front of me so I could read the introductory prayers each day. While the Abbot was teaching the Mahayana part, I could understand it quite well, but I could not understand the Tantric section very well. I spent much time with the Abbot, and in the meantime, I continued to practice spelling and reading by going through some biographies. I stayed about four months in Ngor for teaching, and then returned to Sakya.

The following year, I visited Lhasa for the first time and met His Holiness the Dalai Lama who confirmed me as 'Sakya Trizin designate'. I spent four months in Lhasa visiting many of the monasteries there and in central Tibet. We visited Nalanda and Samye also, and then returned through south Tibet where I visited many holy places and monasteries on pilgrimage.

During these visits, I was hard at work memorizing the *Hevajra Tantra* which is the basic text for Sakya religious practice. Then, early in 1952, I was enthroned at a simple ceremony, as I was then too young for the full enthronement which came later. I had to recite the full *Hevajra Tantra* in front of the monastic officials and teachers of the tantric monastery in Sakya: this is considered a test of ability which all monks had to take. I was then only six, but I am glad to say that I passed by reciting it correctly. After that, I attended the monthly recitation of that tantra by all the monks of the tantric monastery: it was the first ceremony I attended there. Later I left Sakya to attend the enthronement of the Panchen Lama in Shigatse, which lasted for several weeks. This time I traveled with the full dignity and entourage of a Sakya Trizin.

I returned to that summer to receive the Esoteric Path-Result teachings from Khangsar Khenpo, during which he stopped frequently to give other teachings, such as the instructions on *Vajrayogini*, the *Zenpa Zidel* (Parting from the Four Attachments) and many other important instructions. In all, the teaching lasted for a year, until I had to return to Sakya, at the request of the Chinese, for some talks. Early in 1953, I again returned to Ngor Monastery to resume studies there, but unfortunately, Khangsar Khenpo passed away just before he had finished the whole teaching and the teaching was concluded by his successor. I returned to Sakya before September, as that year, I witnessed the yearly ceremony and ritual dance of *Vajrakilaya*. It is always held in the seventh Tibetan month. Then I began the meditative retreat of Hevajra at the Dolma Palace.

Q. *Was this your first retreat?*

A. Not quite. During the time I received the first *Lamdre* teaching, I had performed the retreat of Amitayus and then I gave the consecration to my Guru, Khangsar Khenpo. Also, in the intervals between the two *Lamdre* teachings, I performed the retreat of *Bhutadramara*, a

special form of Vajrapani, for one month. But this was the first major retreat I performed. During the retreat, we had many difficulties. I had a very strict teacher and I was allowed to see only my aunt, my two servants and my teacher. Though I myself remained quite well throughout, my teacher got very ill following the first half of the retreat-very, very ill and we had a difficult time because of his sickness. Nevertheless, the retreat ended successfully. I say 'we' because my sister was performing the same retreat at the same time, but in a different room, some distance away. Of course, we were not allowed to meet, but we communicated by writing notes.

After the retreat, my teacher remained ill for some months and during this period I had a long holiday! I became rather wild and took to wandering off and doing as I pleased. My aunt was a little worried and appointed a temporary teacher under whom I had to memorize the texts of the *Vajrakilaya*, both for daily practice and for the long ritual.

Then the summer of 1954, Khangsar Khenpo's successor was invited to Sakya to give the *Druthab Kundu*, a collection of tantric meditations and teachings collected and edited by the first Khyentse Rinpoche. This lasted for three or four months and was a very pleasant occasion. The entire teaching was held in the summer house in our park at Dolma Palace, and Khangsar Shgabdrung taught in a very leisurely fashion. By this time, my teacher had recovered from his illness and taught me the ritual dances that go with the *Kila* practices. In September, I attended the month-long *Kila* ceremonies. I was not the Master of Ceremonies that year, but I took part in the dances and attended nearly every day of the ceremonies. Next I received the *Mahakala* teachings from Lama Ngawang Lodro Rinchen, and went straight into retreat to meditate on that protector for one month. I received more *Mahakala* teachings from Lama Ngawang, and the *Thangtong Nying-Gyud* from Drupchen Rinpoche, a very great Nyingma yogi and an incarnation of the Tibetan saint, Thangtong Gyalpo. I then entered the retreat of *Vajra-Kila* for three months. During this time, my sister, who was then sixteen, was giving the three month teaching of *Lamdre*. She had never done the *Kila* retreat, so I was asked to give her the consecration when I finished my retreat. This was the first major consecration I gave. About sixty monks were to receive the *Lamdre*, but many more people arrived for the *Kila* Consecration: about one thousand, I think. That was all in my ninth year.

Q. *How do you remember Lama Ngawang Lodro Rinchen?*

A. He was the Lama who caused me to have human birth. He was a very wonderful Lama, very strict in his observance of Vinaya rules of discipline. He would never would eat after lunch, nor wear skins, nor shirts with sleeves. His arms were always bare, no matter how cold it was and no matter how cold it was in Sakya – and Sakya is a really cold place – his room was always as warm as if centrally heated. In his house, we could keep flowers, we could keep water. Elsewhere, we could never keep water during the winter: if we put water in a bottle, it would freeze within minutes and crack the bottle!

Q. *Your Holiness had a strenuous childhood. What relaxations did you enjoy?*

A. I used to enjoy going out into the fields around the Palace. The river ran quite near the Palace and I used to love going there. I remember when I attended the *Kila* ceremony, I would be escorted home by attendants from the town of Sakya itself. Then, as soon as they were out of sight, I would take off all my ceremonial clothes and go down to the river in the simplest attire. I used to like to bathe, but even in September, the water was very, very cold; dreadfully cold. Then sometimes I would like to go out to the summer house in the park. We had an old gramophone, the kind that you wind up, and a pile of old records (mostly British

military marches, but also some Tibetan folk songs) which we enjoyed listening to.

Q. Did your Holiness visit Lhasa again?

A. Yes, in the summer of 1955, I received many esoteric teachings from Lama Ngawang Lodro Rinchen, and that autumn I went again to Lhasa. That winter I received some short teachings from His Holiness Dalai Lama. But Lhasa had changed. When I first visited it in 1951, I saw a beautiful early, traditional Tibetan capital. Even then the Chinese were arriving; a few Chinese were to be seen in the streets. But on my second visit in 1955, I rode into Lhasa from Shigatse by jeep – by Chinese jeep! And Lhasa itself was full of jeeps and lorries; there were Chinese people and goods everywhere.

I stayed about six months in Lhasa, giving some small teachings and performing a sacred dance as a prayer there. At this time, I first met Venerable Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche and stayed quite near him, visiting him frequently. I received many Sakya teachings from him, but most of the teachings I received from him were actually Nyingmapa. Early in the following year, I made another visit to south Tibet and then returned to Lhasa where I had to sit on the Chinese Preparatory Committee, along with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and His Holiness Gyalwa Karmapa and other prominent Tibetans. By then the Chinese intentions were becoming quite clear, but we felt that it was best to try to control the situation as best we could, without violence. In any case, our country was not a powerful one in any military sense.

I returned to Sakya in the summer and later in the year, Khyentse Rinpoche came to Sakya. That winter, His Holiness the Dalai Lama went to India on a pilgrimage for the Buddha Jayanti celebrations and I met him in Shigatse, on his way to India. A little later, I also went to India on a pilgrimage, visiting the four most holy shrines of Buddhist pilgrimage in India: Bodh Gaya, Lumbini, Sarnath, and Kushinagar. I stayed in India about two months and then returned to Sakya. In the following year, 1957, I again performed the meditative retreat of *Vajrakilaya*, and again received the *Lamdre* teaching, this time from the Abbot of the Tantric Monastery in Sakya, the Venerable Jampal Sangpo.

Q. When did your Holiness' full enthronement occur?

A. That was early in 1959, after the New Year. It was an event requiring much preparation. At the end of 1958, the great sacred dance of the protectors of religion was held, at which I presided. Then, at the New Year, the enthronement was held.

Q. How was this performed?

A. In the Tantric Monastery, there is a big courtyard in front of a temple with golden roofs. In this temple, the spiritual throne of Sakya Pandita is kept, on which is placed the temporal throne of Chogyal Phagpa. I had to sit on top of these and teach a text written by Sakya Pandita, called *Sage's Intent*. The teaching, which included a little explanation, lasted for three days. After this, offerings were made by His Holiness the Dalai Lama's representatives, by representatives of Panchen Lama, of Sakya, of many other Tibetans and also of the Chinese, on this occasion. After this a great procession was held.

Q. This must have been shortly before Your Holiness came to India?

A. Yes, we left for India almost immediately afterwards.

Q. *How did you get out of Tibet?*

A. It was very complicated. At that time, the tension in Tibet was very high and people talked of nothing but the Khampas and the Chinese, the Chinese and the Khampas. We made many predictions and they all said the same thing: that Tibet would be lost and many very dreadful things would happen. But we still waited, until one day, news came from an Indian broadcast that there had been a battle in Lhasa and His Holiness the Dalai Lama had escaped to the southeast of Lhasa. Then we hurried. I was unable to leave directly from Sakya because there were many Chinese spies. So I let be known that I was going into retreat at the hermitage not far from Sakya. I arrived there safely and sent word to my aunt and sister to join me. From there we left by night.

Q. *How long did it take?*

A. It is not far from Sakya to the Sikkimese border. We got there safely in five days. Our party consisted of only eight or nine people and, because of the circumstances, I was unable to bring any of the very many precious and holy things we had in Sakya.

In Sikkim, I spent a month in Lachen where, I remember, I began to learn English, and soon after that I could pick out simple words. Then a message came from Khyentse Rinpoche, saying that he was very ill in Gangtok, so I went there. The message, in fact, was brought by a Tibetan doctor who is now my father-in-law, although then I didn't know him! Khyentse Rinpoche was very unwell and I said many prayers for him, but he became weaker and passed away in July 1959.

After this, I went down to Darjeeling and then, in winter I made a pilgrimage through India and Nepal, returning to Kalimpong and Darjeeling in early 1960. I spent that year and the next two years studying philosophy under a very learned Sakya abbot called Khenpo Rinchen. You see, although I have received many teachings and performed many retreats in Tibet, I never had time to study Mahayana philosophy very much, so during these three years, I learned Madhyamika philosophy, logic, prajnaparamita, abhidharma, and other studies. Then at the end of 1962, there was a border war between India and China so we left Darjeeling and came to Mussoorie.

The following year I spent recovering from tuberculosis, but at the end of 1963, I was able to attend the Religious Conference in Dharmasala and in March 1964, we founded the Sakya Centre to function as our main monastery for the time being, located down at the foot of Mussoorie. I went back to Mussoorie to take up studies with the Venerable Khenpo Abbey, a very great Sakya teacher. Primarily, I studied the tantras under him and received many profound explanations that he had received from his own teacher, the first Deshung Rinpoche, the great Tibetan mystic. Later I studied some Madhyamika philosophy under him too, and in addition, poetry, grammar and arithmetic. In 1965, I attended the Second Religious conference in Bodh Gaya. In 1966, I went on a pilgrimage to Sanchi, the caves at Ajanta and Ellora, but otherwise, my studies continued uninterrupted until 1967 when Khenpo Abbey went to Sikkim. In the winter of 1967, I gave the *Lamdre* for the first time in Sarnath, when I was 22. About four hundred monks and perhaps one hundred lay Buddhists attended. Early in the following year, we started our Sakya Rehabilitation Settlement at Puruwala for nine hundred refugees from Sakya. The place was chosen for a physical similarity to Sakya, although of course, it was much hotter.

Perhaps I should mention a succession of Western friends who had stayed with me during these years, helping with our rehabilitation work, and from whom I learned to speak English.

In 1970, a tragic motor accident deprived us of the Venerable Thutop Tulku, a young and very capable monk who had organized the Centre and the Settlement, practically single-handedly. Since I now knew English fairly well, I took over the work of administration. That autumn, I moved to the Sakya Centre and since then I have lived in Rajpur. 1971 and 1972 were good years, as the Venerable Chogye Tri Rinpoche stayed with us in Rajpur, giving a major consecration, the *Gyude Kundu* of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo. In the spring of 1974, I married and soon after left on my first visit to the west. For four months, I visited Switzerland, England, Canada, the United States and Japan, giving religious teachings and meeting Tibetan immigrants and Western Buddhists. On November 19th, 1974, my son, Dungei Rinpoche, was born. The following spring, we went on a pilgrimage to Chogye Rinpoche's newly completed monastery in Lumbini, Nepal, after which I spent a month teaching at our Sakya monastery in Bodhnath, Kathmandu. That summer my aunt, who had brought me up and upon whom all the decisions and work had rested during my childhood, passed away, to our great sorrow. In 1976, I taught in Darjeeling. I taught the *Druthab Kundu* in Ladakh, Kashmir, and undertook a teaching tour of the settlements in south India.

Q. *And next?*

A. I very much look forward to teaching in the West again.

Q. *Your Holiness, whom do you regard as your main Gurus?*

A. My main Guru was Khangsar Khenpo, from whom I received the *Lamdre*. Then my father; Khyentse Rinpoche; Khangsar Shabdrung Rinpoche; Lama Ngawang Lodro Rinchen; and Sakya Khenpo Jampal Zangpo. Then to a lesser degree, Phende Khenpo, Drupchen Rinpoche and many others.

PART TWO

“IF YOU WANT TO KNOW THE FUTURE LOOK FOR IT IN THE PRESENT ACTIONS”

Q. *Your Holiness, why should we practice Buddhist teaching?*

A. I would like to answer this by describing the three types of persons who practice Buddhism. Generally speaking, from the smallest insect on up to the most intelligent human being, there is agreement: all want happiness and all wish to avoid suffering. The majority of human beings do not understand what the cause of suffering is, or what the cause of happiness is, but in the teachings of Buddhism and in their practice, you will find the answer to these questions.

Q. *What are the causes of suffering and happiness?*

A. The *Ratnavali* of Nagarjuna says, “Every action arising from desire, aversion and ignorance produces suffering; every action arising from absence of desire, aversion and ignorance produces happiness.”

Now, as I said, there are three kinds of people. Like all other beings, the lowest person wants happiness and wants neither suffering nor rebirth in the lower realms of existence, so

he practices Buddhism to create causes of rebirth in the human realm or in the heavenly realms of the gods. He does not have the power or the courage to leave worldly existence completely. He only wants the best parts of worldly existence, he wants to avoid the worst parts and that is why he practices the Buddhist religion: in order to get a higher rebirth.

Now the middling sort of person understands that the whole of worldly existence, no matter where one is born, is suffering by its nature, just as fire is hot by its nature. He wants to get out of it altogether and attain nirvana, the state which is entirely away from suffering.

The highest person realizes that, just as he himself does not want to suffer, and does want happiness, so also do all living beings have the same fears and wishes. He knows that, since we have been born again and again from beginningless time in worldly existence, there is not a single sentient being who has not been our mother and father at one time or another. Since we are that close to all sentient beings, the best person is the one who practices Buddhism in order to remove all these countless sentient beings from suffering.

Q. How should we practice?

A. At the beginning of all Buddhist practice come two very important things: meditation of the four recollections and taking refuge.

The four recollections are of the difficulty of getting human birth, of the impermanence of all samsaric things, of the suffering of worldly existence, and of the law of Karma which means the law of cause and result.

Generally speaking, it is very difficult to be born as a human being. We think that there are many human beings but if we compare our numbers to those of the other beings, we realize how few we are. For instance, in each of our bodies there are millions of germs, microbes, viruses and so on.

So statistically the chances of attaining human life are very poor. In any case, there are many places of rebirth which are of no use to beings, as there they will be unable to meet with the Buddha's teachings. There are eight unfavorable places of birth: the realms of hell, of hungry ghosts and of animals, of barbarians, places where religious teaching is incorrect, where there is no Buddha, certain god realms and the realm of dumb people. Yet even if we get a human rebirth, there are ten necessary pre-conditions: it is necessary to be born in a place to which the Buddha has come, a place in which the Buddha actually taught the religion, a place where the teaching is still alive, where the teachers are kind enough to teach, and where there are still Buddhist followers such as monks and lay followers. There are also five external circumstances required of oneself: one must not have committed any of the five limitless downfalls, as this would create a great obstruction.

This difficulty is explained in other ways, also. The cause of human birth is the performance of virtuous acts and keeping correct moral conduct, and since very few people are aware of this, human rebirth is rare by its cause. By nature, it is much easier to be born somewhere else. The difficulty is illustrated by an example: imagine a blind tortoise living in the ocean. Floating on the surface is a yoke. The tortoise come to the surface only once every century, yet he stands a better chance of putting his neck in that yoke than we do of being born in human form.

Concerning the recollection of impermanence: the Buddha said, "The three realms of existence are like a cloud in autumn: the birth and the death of beings is like a dancer's movement; a being's life is like a waterfall, like 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." Everything is changing: outside the seasons change; spring gives way to summer, to autumn and winter. Children grow into adults, adults become old; hair turns from black to white, life shrivels and

fades. Isn't that so? Everything changes constantly. There is not one single place where one can escape impermanence. Since everything changes constantly, one never knows when the end will come. One may be in perfect health today and yet die tomorrow. We know two things of death: it is certain to come and we have no idea when it will come. It could come at any moment and there are many things, internal and external, that can cause it. Thus, if you want to practice Buddhism, you must realize that it is necessary to start immediately. You can never be sure of a tomorrow in which to do anything.

Q. How does this help us? The practice of Buddhism does not make us less impermanent.

A. It will not make us less impermanent, but it will give us the certainty that, in our coming lives, we will have less suffering. The practice of Dharma, of religion, means – briefly speaking; avoid non-virtuous acts; and performing virtuous acts. When you behave in this way, it is obviously that you will be happier in the future.

Q. Does it mean that, since we expect less from this life, we will also suffer less?

A. Yes, that too, but more importantly, by thinking about impermanence we will be moved to practice Dharma quickly. The thought of impermanence helps us to speed up our path a great deal.

Q. What are the six realms and their sufferings?

A. As I said before, no matter where you are in worldly existence, you are suffering. Suffering is of three kinds: the suffering of suffering, the suffering of change, and the suffering of conditioned existence. The suffering of suffering is when you have a headache or something like that. It is simply suffering which everyone accepts and thinks of as suffering. Then the suffering of change is the suffering undergone through perception of change. You are with friends today but you have to depart; when you go, you meet enemies. Nothing stays, and seeing this, we experience the suffering of change. The suffering of conditioned existence means the unsatisfactoriness of worldly activity. We do many things in the world but are never really satisfied. There are always more things to be done, which we cannot do and this is the frustration which is suffering.

The lowest of the six realms are the Hell-realms, of excessive heat and cold, and the 'neighboring hells' which are also states of great suffering, and which last for incredible periods of time. The cause of these states of suffering is hatred. Then there is the realm of hungry spirits who are tantalized by food and drink they cannot swallow. This is the result of desire and stinginess. The animal realm is well known to us and birth there is caused by ignorance. The human realm, too, we know. The fifth realm is of the demi-gods who are constantly engaged in war with the gods out of jealousy, and who will thus naturally suffer in their next lives. The gods seem very comfortable. They enjoy great pleasures and immensely long lives, but sooner or later experience old age and death. As they have done nothing but enjoy themselves, they will not have created the merit to achieve high rebirth and will fall into states of great suffering. The three lower realms' beings experience the suffering of suffering exclusively; humans experience all three, but chiefly the first two, while the gods mainly suffer the last two.

The last of the four recollections is of *karma*, the law of cause and effect. In the Buddhist view, everything we have today and everything we do has a cause in the past. In fact it is said that if you want to know what you did in the past, you should look at your present

situation; whether you are rich or poor, ugly or beautiful, this is the result of past actions, as the future, whether happy or otherwise depends on what you do today. Everything you do will produce a result in the future. If a tree's root is medicinal, the flowers, the leaves, the bark, and everything that grows on the tree will be medicinal, and like this, an act that grows out of the opposite of desire, aversion and ignorance will produce happiness. If the root of the tree is poisonous, then everything that grows on the tree will be poison, just as the acts of desire, aversion and ignorance produce suffering.

Q. Is there a practice based on the law of cause and effect?

A. The law of cause and effect, *karma*, is one of the main teachings of Buddhism. It means that you should always practice virtuous things, since non-virtuous acts will always bring suffering in this life as well as next. If you don't want suffering you should avoid its cause; if there is no cause there will be no result, just as, if the root of the tree is removed, there will be no fruit. If you want happiness you must be very careful about the cause of happiness, just as if you want the tree to grow you must take care of its root. If the root is defective, the tree will not grow.

So before you begin any meditation you should contemplate these four recollections very carefully and then you should take refuge. Taking refuge marks the difference between Buddhists and non-Buddhists: it means you have surrendered, you have taken refuge.

Q. In what way do we surrender?

A. You surrender yourself. As I said, worldly existence is full of sufferings. There are many obvious sufferings and also many which are less obvious and which common people do not notice. We wish to be free from these sufferings but at present we don't have full knowledge or full power to do so, so there is nothing much that we ourselves can do about it for the present. Now, when you undertake an important act you seek help from a powerful person: if you are sick, you consult a doctor and if you have trouble with the law, you go to a lawyer. So, when you want to be saved from the sufferings of worldly existence, you have to take refuge in the Triple Gem, which is the real helper in this undertaking. The Triple Gem consists of the Buddha who is the guide, the Dharma (or religion) which is one's own path and the Sangha, which means one's own spiritual companions. However, the final refuge is only the Buddha: the Dharma or teaching has two parts: the teaching and the realization. The teaching is the Tripitaka (Sutras, Abhidharma, and Vinaya Discourses), but this is like a boat you use to cross a river: when you get to the other side, you simply leave it behind. The realization has also two parts, the truth of cessation and the truth of the path. The first of these is void, *shunyata*, so it cannot be a final refuge, while the path, being itself impermanent, also cannot be the final refuge. As for the Sangha, even its highest members are still on the path so they cannot be final refuge. So really, the refuge is in the Buddha only, but we always take refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

Q. Does that mean that Buddha is permanent?

A. Yes, yes. The Buddha is of course permanent. The dharmakaya 'the Truth Body' is beyond permanence and impermanence and the sambhogakaya, the 'Bliss-Body', always exists. The nirmanakaya, the 'apparent-body' is the form the Buddha takes on this earth, and it does have the appearance of impermanence, though it is always present somewhere, if not here.

Q. What is the actual practice of taking refuge?

A. Taking refuge is performed differently according to the intentions of the three types of persons who perform it, although the three causes – fear, faith and compassion – are the same. The actual practice is the recitation of the prayer of refuge. The simplest prayer says, “I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha.” A more elaborate prayer says, “I take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha until I get enlightenment; by the merit of this doing may all beings attain Buddha's stage.”

But mere recitation of the prayer with your voice is not sufficient; it must be recited from the heart. If you want to take refuge from the rain, it won't help you to say “house, house” or “umbrella, umbrella”. You have to find a house, you have to go and get an umbrella, and if you do this, you will be saved from the rain without any doubt. So it is necessary to take Refuge very seriously, with full belief and, moreover, you must think that, no matter what happens, you will seek refuge only in the Triple Gem, and that you will always remain under it. Reciting the prayer in this way and with this intention is the first practice of Buddhism and one of the foundations of all practice. Taking refuge like this distinguishes Buddhists from non-Buddhists.

Although recitation like this is sufficient to make you a Buddhist, it is common for a short ceremony to be performed in front of the spiritual guide. He will say the words of the prayer, which the disciple will repeat after him. The disciple also promises to uphold the basic moral teachings of Buddhism. From that time onwards, you should continue to recite the prayer daily with great devotion.

Q. Is animal rebirth really possible for humans?

A. Yes, definitely. There are many stories of animals being reborn as humans as a result of good actions and of humans being reborn as animals, too, as a result of bad actions. Some animals are extremely kind, especially to their offspring, and by working very hard, they can create enough causes to achieve human birth.

Q. Why is human birth so important?

A. Human birth is extremely precious because, through human life, one can achieve not only higher rebirth and nirvana, but also one can practice Dharma and get enlightenment.

Q. Does it really help us to think a great deal about impermanence? We always know we are impermanent, and thinking about it too much might make us miserable.

A. Yes, it does help. Tsongkhapa said, “A prisoner has only one thought: When can I get out of this prison? This thought arises constantly in his mind. Your thought of impermanence should be like this; meditate on impermanence until this state of mind arises.”

Q. Are we really in the position of prisoners? We often do find things pleasant in worldly existence.

A. But that pleasure isn't permanent, is it? That very pleasure can lead to disaster, can't it? So we are happy now, but we never know what might happen in the next hour. There may be a complete disaster. Since pleasure is impermanent, since it is very uncertain, you are not actually happy because your pleasure is colored with anxiety. In fact, you are never happy

because you don't know what will come and thus anxiety is inevitable.

Q. Are the hells metaphors for states or amounts of suffering or do they really exist as described in the Buddhist Sutras?

A. Something really exists, I think. Actually it says in the sutras that they really exist even much more terribly than they are described because, it says, the Buddha didn't fully describe them.

If he had full described them, people would have fainted.

Q. How real are they?

A. They are as real as the life we have today. Yes, many people think that they are not real, they are like a dream. But actually, we are happy and unhappy in dreams, just as real as we are when we are awake. This present experience also is not real, but we think everything around us is real. Hell is as real as this. Of course hell, also, in reality, is not real. This is also not real. What is this, then?

Q. Do the Buddhas suffer?

A. No, they never suffer. They are absolutely free from suffering.

Q. Do they see suffering?

A. They don't see suffering, either.

Q. Then how can they help people who are suffering?

A. They don't suffer. This answer is one of the differences between the Sakya and Gelugpa orders; the Gelugpas say that the Buddhas do see suffering and we say that they do not. The man who has awakened from sleep doesn't have dreams. This impure samsaric scene of suffering is like a dream, it's like an illusion. So the man who has awakened from this illusion can never dream again. But, due to his Bodhicitta, (enlightenmentmind) and his compassion, help for others spontaneously arises. But the Buddha himself never sees suffering. For him, all things are transformed into pure appearance.

Q. Is the Buddha involved in karma?

A. He has achieved the final karmic result, the highest and best possible results of karma.

Q. Can anything happen to us which is not the result of our own actions?

A. No, never.

Q. Can the Buddha perceive the results of his or others' acts?

A. Yes, for instance, there have been many prophecies, but I don't think the Buddha sees or perceives these results. Where there is a need for a prophecy, it just arises spontaneously.

Q. *Can we modify the results of past acts?*

A. Certainly. The Vajrasattva meditation can purify many of our past bad actions, but in any case, the creation of good causes and merits is very helpful and necessary.

PART THREE

THE BODHISATTVA IS BORN FROM LOVE AND COMPASSION

Q. *In the Lesser Vehicle of mere personal salvation (Hinayana), nirvana (liberation) is one of the four noble truths, but it seems less important in the Great Vehicle (Mahayana).*

A. Yes. There are two extremes, worldly existence and liberation. The first is completely involved in suffering and the other has completely gone beyond it. The Great Vehicle teaches that we should enter neither. Instead, we should follow the Middle Way which means that, through the power of wisdom, we do not remain in the worldly existence and through the power of compassion we do not remain in liberation. If you are in liberation, you cannot be active, you cannot help other beings. You yourself will be completely free from suffering but there is nothing you can do for others. By attaining Enlightenment, which we call the Great Liberation, you are not only free from suffering but you can also help all sentient beings immensely. That is the main difference.

Q. *What are the principle practices of Mahayana?*

A. There are three main practices: love, compassion and enlightenmentmind. Love means that you wish every sentient being in all the six realms of existence to be happy, and compassion is the wish that all suffering beings should part from suffering. The enlightenmentmind means, generally speaking, the wish to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. These three are very important. Without love and compassion, the enlightenmentmind will not arise, and without enlightenmentmind, you cannot attain enlightenment, so therefore love and compassion are necessary. But of these, compassion is of particular importance. It is said to be the seed of the Great Vehicle in the beginning; in the meantime, it is said to be the water that makes the crops grow, and finally it is the ripening of the fruit. So, clearly, compassion being in the beginning, the middle and the end, it is very important. Thus, when Chandrakirti wrote the *Madhyamikavatara*, he preceded it with an homage to compassion. "The Buddha", he said, "arises from the Bodhisattva and the Bodhisattva is born out of love and compassion, but especially out of compassion." The main cause of the Great Vehicle is compassion.

Q. *How should we practice these?*

A. First, study is required and then meditation. Visualize those who are dear to you and wish them to be happy and be free from suffering; then pray that you will be able to do this. Then meditate on those who are not near to you and finally on all sentient beings. In fact, you should start by thinking of the four recollections, then taking refuge, then visualizing your mother and thinking very clearly on the most elaborate details of her kindness to you and the care she had for you. Then realize that she is still suffering and creating the causes of suffering: at this, the wish to help her will arise and, when you want to help her out of

suffering, the Enlightenment-mind will arise. Finally, pray to the Guru and Triple Gem that she may be happy and without suffering. Then think of your father, of other beings and of your worst enemy, too. If this is difficult, remember that hatred is your real enemy and will create states of great suffering. Then meditate upon all beings in the six realms until natural love arises without a single reservation. Finally, wish that any merit accumulated throughout this may benefit all sentient beings equally. This sharing of merit concludes every meditation.

Compassion is of the greatest importance and should be practiced as much as possible. It should be completely instinctive. Avalokiteshvara, the Lord of Compassion, said in a sutra, "One who wishes to gain enlightenment should not practice many things, but just one, and that one is compassion." The practice of compassion is of three kinds. *Compassion to beings* is the wish that, firstly your mother and then all other limitless sentient beings should be free from suffering, and the wish that you may be able to help them. *Compassion to dharmas* (unconditioned phenomena) is the wish that sentient beings should abandon the root of suffering, for the root of suffering is ignorance. The third one is called *objectless compassion*. You must realize that, really, all ignorance of the real, they are very much tied to the ego and this causes them suffering.

Q. *Sentient beings are not really there?*

A. No, actually sentient beings are not really there, but through attachment to ego, there arises illusory appearances. Since you desire certain of these appearances, you may also have many aversions to others, and so long as you ignorantly believe in them to be really existing, you remain caught in the closed circle which is worldly existence.

The third practice is of enlightenmentmind, which is a very important practice. Generally speaking, there are two enlightenmentminds, the relative one and the absolute one. The relative enlightenmentmind also has two parts, called "wishing" and "entering". The wishing enlightenmentmind is the aspiration, the wish to gain enlightenment for all those sentient beings, and this is like a wish to make a journey. The entering enlightenmentmind is like making that journey: everything you actually do to achieve the aim of getting enlightenment is the entering enlightenmentmind; so in fact, this entering enlightenmentmind includes all the Buddhist practices such as the six *paramitas* of giving, moral conduct, patience, vigor, meditation and wisdom. Then the absolute enlightenmentmind is the understanding of the true nature of all things, which is to say, emptiness.

To realize this is absolute enlightenmentmind.

Q. *How should we understand emptiness?*

A. Emptiness is actually only a name. It doesn't mean that all things are empty or void. Every religion tries to explain the true nature of phenomena, but all have come to the conclusion of something existing, either positively or negatively. Ordinary people do not think much about phenomena and their origins, but the more spiritual people do, and wonder why things exist and where they come from. Christianity concluded that all things are created by God. An early Buddhist school, *Sarvastivada*, concluded that, although gross things do not really exist, atoms – so minute that they can have no sides facing different directions – do exist as basic elements. A more advanced Buddhist school, *Vijnanavada*, decided that ultimately nothing exists externally and that the things we seem to perceive are only projections of the mind. However, when the *Madhyamika* philosophers examined phenomena, everything seemed to disappear and they could find nothing. They were not satisfied by the explanation that God created everything or that tiny atoms existed, and they reasoned that it was impossible for

subjective minds to exist if objects do not exist, as mind and objects are interdependently as inseparable as are right and left. So, if there was no external matter, there could be no mind. The *Madhyamika* concluded, after a very scrupulous examination, that there was nothing, ultimately, that could be clung to as really existent. Positive things could not be found, negative things could not be found, nothing could be found which could be accepted as really existing because the true nature of all things is beyond existence and non-existence, beyond thought, and inexpressible. Shantideva said, "The absolute is not an object of mind; it lies beyond mind." It is something you cannot describe; it is the wonder of the incomprehensible." When we talk about such things, however, we have to name them, so we call it emptiness, but really emptiness is not something that can be named, it is inexpressible.

Of course, this is all according to the ultimate view. Relatively speaking, the *Madhyamika* accepts whatever ordinary people accept, but the writings of this school do show an experience of the inexpressibility of all things.

Q. *Isn't this critique of phenomena merely a logical paradox? Can it have any bearing on daily life?*

A. Of course it does. When you realize the ultimate truth, you are free from suffering. We are in suffering because we haven't awakened from the relative illusion and, due to this, we hold things as real; holding them as real, we act and hence suffer and create many more causes of suffering.

Q. *So the real point is attachment?*

A. When you are no longer attached to things as real, you create no further causes of suffering.

Q. *Is this a subject of meditation?*

A. There are many meditations on this in the Mahayana, and especially in the Vajrayana. We have to realize that sufferings come from bad *karma*, which comes from the defilements and that the defilements arise from ego. If we are deluded, we may think a coil or rope is a snake; we do this in supposing that a self exists. When you have 'self', there must be 'other'; when there is 'other', there is desire for 'self' and aversion to 'other', and this leads further into delusion and the obscuration of the true nature. The enlightenment-mind is the best way to uproot the mistaken notion of a self. In what way are other beings different from you? Try first to see them as equal to yourself and to love them as much as you love yourself until, finally, you can love beings better than yourself. Try to wish constantly, however much you are suffering, that, even so, all the sufferings of all sentient beings may come to you and that all your causes of happiness may be given to them. And you should always wish that the merit gained through this should be of benefit to all beings.

The practice for realizing emptiness, the absolute enlightenment-mind, has two parts; the practice of concentration and the analysis of experience, which shows us clearly the *Madhyamika* experience. But these practices need some lengthier explanation and I cannot deal with them adequately here. But, before and after every practice, you must take refuge and share the merit.

Q. *If things and mind don't exist, what are appearances? Where do they begin and where do they end?*

A. They have no beginning. There *is* an end, though, when you achieve enlightenment. This is all an illusion, unreal, like a dream. Where does the dream arise? Where does it go? It is like that. This is a long dream.

Q. *So what are appearances?*

A. This is a long dream.

Q. *Love and compassion are good, but doesn't there come a point when it is better to be angry with people? Is angry ever justified?*

A. Maybe, if the intension is white, even though action is black. Even if you are angry, if it is from a beneficial thought, your anger arises from compassion, and whatever arises out of compassion is good. If the root is medicinal, even if the fruit appears bad, it will be medicinal.

Q. *Buddhism is often thought of as leading to negative and passive behavior.*

A. This is true if you enter and abide in liberation. But if you enter the Mahayana, instead of selfish desire for liberated quiescence, you have compassion which is the active desire for the benefit of all beings.

Q. *Buddhism is sometimes said to be atheistic because it holds that there is no God.*

A. Buddhism does not believe in God as the creator of the world, and in that sense, you might say it is atheistic. If, however, God is something else, a divine compassion or a divine wisdom, manifest in the form of a deity, you might say that Buddhism is not atheistic but polytheistic.

Q. *If there is really no self, then what is reborn?*

A. The continuum of mind, the serial mid-stream of a person and the results of his deeds give rise to a new being. In any case, rebirth is a relative truth. The interpretation of relative truth differs from school to school, from religion to religion. The *Madhyamika* believes the relative to be whatever we see, without examination: the view of ordinary people. Relatively, there is rebirth, but not ultimately.

Q. *How did the 'Madhyamika' philosophy arise? Isn't it later than the Buddha's time?*

A. Of course it is Buddhist: it is the actual meaning of the *Prajnaparamita Sutra*, where it is clearly said that anyone who follows extremes will never be free from suffering. The extremes are of positive and negative, of belief in existence and non-existence, and the like. The philosophy is developed from the *Sutras* which were taught by the Buddha.

Q. *If we don't accept the existence of beings, since all things are emptiness, what reason do we have for being compassionate?*

A. Everything is not just emptiness; emptiness is also a wrong view, an extreme – the true nature of things is away from extremes. In order to realize this, you have to accumulate a

great deal of merit and the best way to do this is to practice love and compassion for all sentient beings. Until this merit has been accumulated, the understanding of emptiness will not arise.

PART FOUR

“THE GURU HAS A TREMENDOUS RESPONSIBILITY”

Q. *What is Mantrayana, your Holiness?*

A. *Mantrayana* or *Tantra*, actually is method. The first intentions, and the final goal, are exactly the same as they are in Mahayana, but since the Mantrayana is direct, more intelligent and has more methods, it reaches the same destination from the same starting place much more quickly: the difference is as between traveling by train and by aeroplane. The Mahayana practices consist mainly of meditation through thinking about things, but in the Mantrayana, our bodies are also extensively used. By knowing and using our bodies, we can reach our destination much more quickly. Now, many things are required for an aeroplane to fly, such as fuel, wind, the design of the machine, and so on, and in the same way, when we try to attain realization in the Mantrayana we practice not only in thought: we visualize different mandalas, repeat mantras, and so on, and you can say that if these practices are correctly followed, realization will automatically arise.

Q. *Is this the only difference between Mahayana and Mantrayana?*

A. The Mahayana is called the Cause Yana, the Casual Path, and the Mantrayana is called the Result Path. In the Mahayana, you work to create the right causes by practicing giving, moral conduct and so on. These practices are very valuable and correct, but they are still very different from the immense qualities of the Buddha. But in Mantrayana, you imagine yourself right from the beginning in the form of the result – the Buddha, in one form or another. By this practice, the result – which is the same as the practice – will arise and consequently Mantrayana is called the Result Path. Right from the beginning, you think of yourself as the Buddha with all the qualities, the thirty-two major signs, the eighty minor marks and so on.

Q. *Is it not wrong to think of ourselves as the Buddha?*

A. Indeed not. It is said in Mahayana, too, of course, that the nature of our mind, of our entire organism, is actually Buddha, and has always been. However, we have not realized this and we are wrapped up in an illusion, so consequently we suffer. If the obscurations and defilements were intrinsically part of our mind, purification would not be possible. Coal will not become white, however much we wash it, but since the nature of mind is pure, it *can* be purified. Since other beings have attained enlightenment, it is clear that it is possible for us, too, that our minds can be purified.

The way Mantrayana deals with this problem is as follows: there are five races, or types, of people. Actually there are hundreds and thousands of different types, but they can all be included in five categories. These five, in fact, can also be included in one, which is *Vajradhara*, but in general, it is convenient to think of five. These five we imagine in a mandala, which is a celestial mansion of certain proportions and decorations, surrounded by fire. The Buddha in the center is dark blue and is called *Akshobhya*, 'the Unshakable One.' In the East is white *Buddha Vairocana*, 'the One Who Creates Appearances'. In the South is

yellow *Ratnasambhava*, 'the One Who Has the Nature of the Gem'. In the West is red *Amitabha*, 'Limitless Light', and in the North is green *Amoghasiddhi*, 'the One Who is Skilled in Accomplishing all Possible Works'. They all look like *Shakyamuni Buddha* except they all have different *mudras* or gestures of the hands. Akshobhya touches the earth on the *bhumisparsha* mudra; Vairocana's hands are in the gesture of teaching; Ratnasambhava displays the gesture of giving, Amitabha, the gesture of meditation; while Amoghasiddhi holds up his hand to show the crossed *Vajra*, the *mudra* of fearlessness. Each of these five has specific qualities, but each is also related to the five most common defilements we are afflicted with: the blue Akshobhya to anger, red Amitabha to passion and desire, green Amoghasiddhi to envy, white Vairocana to ignorance, and yellow Ratnasambhava to pride and avarice. These colors are clearly related to the corresponding defilements. In English, you say 'green with envy' while passion is associated with red and anger with dark blue. We can clearly see the characteristics of the five races in individuals: an individual who is dark in complexion, who may have a mark on his person resembling a *vajra* and who is often angry, is of the race Akshobhya (the *vajra* is the sign of Akshobhya). Since there is a complete link of cause and effect, that person will succeed particularly easily if he practices the path related to Akshobhya. You see, the Buddha Akshobhya represents the complete transformation of anger. In Mantrayana, we never regard any defilement, such as anger or desire, as something to be repressed. Instead, the energies tied up in the defilement are purified and result in one of the five Buddhas, each of whom is characterized by a certain type of wisdom. This is another reason why the Mantrayana is the 'Result Path'.

In fact, there is no impurity, of course. The impurities appear because we have not realized the truth and we are still thinking in terms of subject and object. So we can say that impurities also come from delusion.

Q. *How do we practice this path?*

A. Although this path is obviously superior, it is not easy to understand correctly. For a start, we must be certain of our practice of pure resolve, the *bodhicitta*, and only then can we receive the teachings of the five Buddhas, in one of the many forms they take to suit our own individual nature. This teaching is given in the form of an empowerment which is called *wang* in Tibetan. It means 'consecration' or 'initiation'. This empowerment is a transmission, and it is necessary to receive it from a qualified Guru, and then to study, think about it and meditate on it in order to achieve the final result. After receiving the consecrations, one must carry out the daily practice without fail, and learn to think very clearly and completely of oneself as identified with the final result. Then, because of the connection between cause and result, the result will naturally arise.

Q. *This transmission is important?*

A. Transmission from the Guru is particularly important in Mantrayana. The Guru transmits the teaching to you, and he is part of an unbroken succession of teachers which goes right back to the original Buddha, Vajradhara, from whom the teachings arose in the first place. Even in the Mahayana, you cannot practice without guidance, and this is particularly true of Mantrayana.

Q. *Does this mean that we will not get the result unless we receive the teaching in this way?*

A. Of course we will not. No one can get anything merely by studying a text. You must first

receive the teaching in an oral tradition which goes right back to Vajradhara. This direct unbroken blessing of the teaching line must be received first; without this special blessing, no ripening will occur. Although most of the teachings have been written down, you must first receive them orally; then you can study them.

Q. So the Guru is very essential?

A. It is said in the tantras that the Guru is the source of all *siddhis*, or spiritual accomplishments. So it is important to find a Guru, and, generally, it is necessary to find the right Guru, the one who has all the qualifications to teach tantra. In particular, it is necessary for you to find the lama with whom you have particular connection by *karma*. For instance, when Milarepa first heard of Marpa, he felt a particularly urgent desire to meet him immediately. Or when Tsarchen heard of the great Sakya teacher, Doringpa, he felt a special urge to meet him as quickly as possible. When you find this Guru, you must receive a transmission and explanation from him. In tantra, it is necessary to receive the *wang*, the empowerment, the transmission of consecration. *Wang* is the door to tantra. Without *wang* there is nothing you can do. *Wang* is like fertilizing the ground and planting the seed. It creates the right conditions. After receiving the *wang*, it is only a matter of looking after the seed to see that the crop grows.

Q. How can we recognize the Guru with whom you have a karmic link?

A. In some cases there is a clear sign. In Tsarchen's case, a woman appeared to him while meditating in a cave. At that time, he was a Gelugpa monk. She gave him a book and told him to find Doringpa. He found Doringpa in Sakya, and discovered that the book he had been given had come from Doringpa's library. The woman was a manifestation of Vajrayogini, a female deity. Tsarchen practiced her meditation in particular after receiving it from Doringpa, and achieved great realization. Generally, however, if you feel a particular urge to meet or to communicate with a certain lama, a feeling of something happening when you meet him, this is a good indication.

It can also be discovered by prediction. When I was very young, my aunt asked some monks to do a form of prediction involving a mirror. They saw a strange lama in the mirror and myself in front of him. The lama had long ears and the space between his upper lip and nose was also very wide. He had a scar. We didn't know who it could be, but later discovered it was Khyentse Rinpoche.

Q. Does this mean that we can only get good results with a lama with whom we have a karmic link?

A. No, not necessarily. In my case, I was unable to receive a great deal of teaching from Khyentse Rinpoche. Any qualified Guru is good, but there is a special one who can help you more than any other.

Q. Is it right for a Guru to make extravagant demands on his disciples?

A. Yes. For instance when Marpa was teaching Lama Ngog, he asked him if he had brought all his wealth. Ngog replied that he had left behind only one lame old goat. Marpa sent him back to fetch it. Marpa said that although a lame old goat made no difference to him: he had demanded it to uphold the dignity of the teaching. If you have to offer everything, you must

hold back nothing. But the relationship of Guru and disciple is not the relationship of a master and a servant. It is the relationship of a father and son. It is a spiritual relationship, but it must be as warm and close as the relationship of a father and his son. The Guru has a tremendous responsibility to care for his sons who, in turn must follow all the teachings they are given, and keep all their vows.

Q. *What are the vows involved?*

A. They are far from simple. After receiving the *wang*, there are many vows to keep, in addition to daily practice and study. If you have already received the *pratimoksha* vows of the Hinayana code, you must keep these and, then in addition to the Mahayana vows, you must keep the Vajrayana vows which are very important. Without keeping these, no practice will be effective. The vows are given to create the right conditions for caring for the seed planted during consecration. The vows must be kept properly and daily practice must be performed with its visualizations and mantra recitations and meditation on the two stages of *kyerim* (process of creation) and *dzogrim* (process of completion).

Q. *What actually is a tantric deity?*

A. There are limitless living beings with different tastes, backgrounds, ideas and dispositions. In order to suit different types, the transcendental wisdom, or Buddha, or whatever you prefer to call it, has taken different shapes. For instance, people who have much desire meditate on deities embracing. People who have much hatred meditate on deities in a wrathful, angry form. People who have much ignorance meditate on very elaborate deities in many jewels and ornaments. But actually they are all the same transcendental wisdom appearing in different forms to suit different types of people.

Q. *What is the connection between tantric teaching and the historical Buddha?*

A. We call the historical Buddha the 'common' Buddha and the tantric Buddhas 'un-common', but many of the tantras were recited by the historical Buddha. The *Hevajra Tantra* is one of these.

Q. *What is Mahamudra?*

A. *Mahamudra* is the transcendental wisdom you realize after practicing *kyerim* and *dzog-rim*. *Kyerim* is the process of creation: you visualize a mandala arising out of a letter, you visualize it peopled with deities. *Dzog-rim* means the stage of completion. This is usually at the end of the practice. You imagine everything being absorbed back into the original letter and then that, too, disappears. Actually *kyerim* purifies birth and *dzog-rim* purifies death.

Q. *What are main Sakya practices?*

A. The main Sakya practice is *Lamdre*, or The Path Including the Result, which covers the Hinayana, Mahayana and Mantrayana. It comes to us through Virupa, a great Indian saint who lived in 650 A.D., and it was brought to Tibet by the translator Drogmi, who died in 1072. It is based on the consecration and practices of the *Hevajra Tantra* and includes the philosophy of tantra as well as all the yogic practices such as inner heat breathing yoga, bodily positions, the yoga of dreams, *pho-wa* or transference of consciousness, Bardo

practices and so on. The entire teaching takes three months to give. Then we practice on a very special, very esoteric teaching of Naropa, a *Vajrayogini* teaching with eleven yogas. Then we have many teachings of *Mahakala*; we have *Vajrakila*, which comes from the original Nyingma tradition of my family; *Sarvaidya*, which is particularly helpful for the dying and the dead; *Vajrabhairava*, a wrathful form of Manjushri; the 'Thirteen Golden Dharmas' that belong only to the Sakya Order, and many others. But the *Lamdre* contains everything.

Q. *In the Western concept of morality, sexual energies are usually regarded as a hindrance to the spiritual path. Does the tantra mean the acceptance of these energies and can they really help us along the path?*

A. *If they are rightly used; if used by the right person, at the right time and correctly, they can be a very great help. The story is often told of King Indrabhuti, who told Shakyamuni Buddha that he would rather be reborn as a wolf in the jungle than undertake a spiritual path which demanded the renunciation of worldly things. The Buddha gave him a special teaching, the *Guhyasamaja* teaching, of which we still have the transmission. Mere external renunciation is, of course, of little use; one can renounce something externally and still be very attached to it! True renunciation is the renunciation of attachment. In any case, King Indrabhuti was of the very highest type of person and he and his entire court actually attained enlightenment while the Buddha was giving them the teaching!*

However, most tantric practitioners are monks who are not allowed worldly pleasures and who must, of course, be celibate. King Indrabhuti attained enlightenment immediately, but we only have to read the story of Milarepa to see the difficulties that even gifted individuals undergo.

Q. *What dangers are there in incorrect practice?*

A. "If something goes wrong in tantra, there is only one direction: down to hell." Practicing tantra is like being a snake in a bamboo tube: it can only go up or down. It is necessary to find a good Guru and practice the teaching very carefully.

Q. *Why does tantra involve so much secrecy?*

A. I think that, generally, it is to avoid creating disbelief in, or even aversion to, tantric teachings. If people hear things at the wrong time or without proper explanation, they may be shocked and think that *tantra* is a bad thing and lose faith in the tantric path. Also, if people see *mandalas* and perhaps read *mantras* in books, they may be tempted to try and practice by themselves, which is a very serious mistake. In tantra you cannot do anything by yourself. Everything must be handed on to you by the Guru.

Q. *Is tantra more than just ritual?*

A. Ritual is only a small part of tantra. The main practice is one's daily meditation, visualization and recitation, the practice of physical yogas, breathing yogas and so on.

Q. *What is the result?*

A. Generally the result is the three, or four, or five bodies (*kayas*) of the Buddha. These are included in the three *kayas*; two are *rupa* or 'form' *kayas*, and one is a spiritual 'body'. This

latter is called the *dharmakaya*, the 'body of reality'. It is the continuation of the mind which has been completely transformed, which has become completely inseparable from *shunyata*. The *sambhogakaya*, the 'body of bliss' is the 'body' that dwells permanently in the *Akanishtha* Buddhafield, giving teachings to the great bodhisattvas. The *nirmanakaya*, or 'illusory body', is of different types, but the excellent *nirmanakaya* is one like the historical Buddha who appeared among us in India. These 'bodies' result from the transformation of our present organism. Our present body becomes the *rupakaya* and our present mind becomes the *dharmakaya* or 'body of reality'.

PART FIVE

“THE BUDDHA SEES THAT EGO DOES NOT EXIST ANYWHERE”

Q. *It is said that the most important quality needed for successfully practicing Dharma is great faith. What kind of faith is needed? Why is faith so important?*

A. Of course faith is very important but it is not the only important thing. It is the beginning. Without it, you cannot achieve good results. For instance, if the seed is burnt, you cannot grow a good crop. No matter how much you practice Dharma, you will not get any result without faith. But it is not a blind faith that is required. Generally, there is said to be three types of faith: firstly *voluntary faith*, which means that you perceive so many excellent qualities in the Triple Gem that you wish to accept it in order to benefit all sentient beings; secondly, *clear faith*, which means that, seeing the great, good qualities of the Buddha, your mind becomes clear and certain; and thirdly is the *faith of confidence*, which means that you accept the Buddhist teachings as valid, such as the Four Noble Truths, and so on: you study these teachings and conclude that they are correct.

Q. *So faith is not just a matter of accepting certain dogma?*

A. No, no, certainly not.

Q. *The teaching of rebirth is unfamiliar to the West. Can one practice Dharma effectively if one does not accept rebirth?*

A. According to our definition of the practice of Dharma, no. We say that, whatever you practice, however high or good it may be, it is not Dharma if it is just intended for this life. Dharma is what you practice for the next life, so the idea of rebirth cannot be separated from the idea of Dharma. The law of *karma* is an intrinsic part of *Dharma* and future rebirth is the result of present causes.

Q. *Many people in the West might deny the universality of suffering.*

A. Buddhists however say that, wherever you are in worldly existence, there is suffering. It is wrong to ignore the continual presence of suffering. One should not hide from suffering; one should know its cause and try to avoid creating the causes of suffering.

Q. *What is the 'anatma' or 'egolessness' doctrine as taught by the Buddha?*

A. The Buddha sees that ego does not exist anywhere. Mind is not ego, body is not ego. Ego is just a name given to a grouping of things: form, perception, feeling, impulses and consciousness all together. So, in reality, when you try to find what it is we call ego, there is nothing. Ego is just a name given to a collection of things.

Q. *Even though we have no immortal soul, doesn't ego exist in some way?*

A. No, ego never exists, but the continuity of mind exists.

Q. *Whence does our strongest sense of ego arise?*

A. Since beginningless time, we have been born in worldly existence with a very strong habit of thinking that the continuum of mind is our own ego, and we have lived with a very strong attachment to it.

Q. *So ego is only a habit of thought?*

A. Yes.

Q. *Some Westerners think that death is complete annihilation.*

A. That is not right: when you die your body ends, but your mind still continues.

Q. *If there is no real ego, what continues?*

A. The continuum of the mind: it is like a rosary – all the beads are different, but it is the same rosary.

Q. *What is mind?*

A. There are many parts to it, but there is a very basic aspect which we call *kun-shi*, (*alayavijnana*). Literally, this means 'foundation of all' and it is a lucent 'self-seeing'. It is the base on which worldly existence and liberation arise. It is actually unobstructed mind, that part of mind which doesn't grasp at outer objects. It is lucent and continues right from beginningless time until enlightenment is reached.

Q. *This mind is also non-existent in the absolute?*

A. Relatively it exists, of course. Ultimately, it is *shunyata*, but relatively it exists. In reality, you cannot say it exists or doesn't exist.

Q. *Is it an individual or is it a kind of collective consciousness, a common basis of all individual minds?*

A. It is individual.

Q. *What distinguishes followers of the Mahayana from followers of the Hinayana?*

A. There are seven differences, but the main thing is that one who wishes to get

Enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings belong to the Mahayana.

Q. *Is compassion for all living beings just a matter of feeling sorry for them?*

A. No. Compassion is a thought, the wish for beings to be free from suffering.

Q. *Does compassion have to involve understanding the cause of suffering, or is it just a matter of feeling?*

A. I think both are involved. Compassion has three phases: the wish that the cause of their suffering be removed, and the wish that beings should become freed from suffering by understanding the true nature of all things. The practice of compassion clearly involves an understanding of the causes of suffering.

Q. *The meditation for arousing compassion is based upon a reflection of the kindness of our mother. What should we do if our mother was not kind?*

A. Every mother can be considered kind. It is a great kindness that she gave you a human body. That is enough for you to consider her kind. If the meditation is difficult, you should always try to think of her kind actions and good qualities until the feeling of love arises.

Q. *Your Holiness has said that our sense of 'I' is really an illusion. If this is so, why is it difficult for us to see this?*

A. As I said earlier, from beginningless time, through many lives we have built up propensities which are reinforced by every act that assumes 'I' is real; these propensities make it very difficult for us to realize the illusory nature of 'I'.

Q. *Seeing the unreality of ego is like breaking a bad habit?*

A. Yes.

Q. *Your Holiness has said that the teaching of rebirth is a relative truth and that many things exist relatively but not ultimately; what is this distinction between relative and ultimate truth?*

A. Yes, there are two truths, relative and ultimate. Relatively we suffer, relatively there is cause, path and result. But in the experience of ultimate truth, nothing can be said to exist, nor not exist, nor both together, nor neither. These are what we call the four objectionable extremes; they are objectionable in the sense that valid logical objections can be raised to all four possibilities.

Q. *Can ultimate truths be explained in words?*

A. No, although it can be described to some extent. However, in fact, it can only be realized and experienced.

Q. *Is the Madhyamika doctrine of emptiness taught by all schools of Tibetan Buddhism and is their teaching the same?*

A. Yes, they all teach the same thing, but their ways of teaching differ. They all have their own qualities and all achieve the same result.

Q. *Do followers of Mantrayana accept all the Mahayana teachings?*

A. Yes, Mantrayana accepts all Mahayana teachings. It is distinguished by the greater variety of methods, the use of more direct methods to attain the truth.

Q. *What is the significance of the vajra and bell used in tantric meditations and ceremonies?*

A. Each has many facets, but they are mainly symbolic of method and wisdom, which are of equal importance on our path; they also represent masculine and feminine qualities.

Q. *Ritual is important in Tibetan Buddhist practice: what is its use?*

A. Ritual is very important and, through its practice, much progress may be made. However, it is not necessary for everybody to perform elaborate rituals. Only the *Vajra* and bell are necessary, and *mudras*.

Q. *Why are mudras important?*

A. They are very significant, externally and internally, and are very helpful in visualization practices. They also have much power in themselves, to protect, to receive blessings, to heal.

Q. *What qualities are required before one can give wangs?*

A. Three types of Gurus are described in the *tantras*. The highest type is one who has really seen the deity as clearly as we would see another person. The second type is one who has received some sign of spiritual accomplishment, at least some sign, even perhaps in a dream. The third type, which is usual these days, is the Guru who has received all the necessary *wangs* and teachings from a proper Guru, and who has performed the retreats of certain major deities, who learned all the rituals, the *mudras*, the arrangement of the mandala, and so on. Then only can he give *wangs*.

Q. *Is it good enough to receive the teaching from a Guru of the third type?*

A. Yes, it make some connection, even if it is not close as the first type. The first type of Guru can introduce you to the deity as he would to a friend!

Q. *What is a meditation retreat?*

A. There are many different kinds. You can have a simple retreat when you practice the meditations on love, compassion and the resolve to win enlightenment. In tantric meditation you visualize the deities, recite the *mantras*, concentrate on seeing the deities' form very clearly, or simply meditate on *shunyata*. There are many practices.

Q. *Why are retreats so important?*

A. Through meditative retreats, you attain enlightenment. Without performing many retreats, it

is not possible to attain enlightenment. It is well known that in Tibet many yogis spent years in solitary retreat for this purpose; some still do so in India. Unless you have the very highest qualities, it is not possible to attain Enlightenment in this life without performing long retreats.

Q. *In Mantrayana practice, does it matter which deity one meditates on?*

A. It is best to meditate on a deity with which one has a karmic connection. This is called *yidam*, or 'patron deity'.

Q. *Can every deity be a yidam?*

A. Not all. The protectors cannot be *yidams*. There is a class of deities which are *yidams*, and among these will be one with whom you have a particular connection.

Q. *Can bodhisattvas like Manjushri and Avalokitechvara be yidams?*

A. Yes, they have both forms, as bodhisattvas and as *yidams*.

Q. *What qualities are required of us before we can take wangs?*

A. Many different qualities of the worthy disciple are described, but the main qualities are faith, compassion and *bodhicitta*. People without a developed *bodhicitta* are not allowed to take major consecrations, the consecrations of deities like *Hevajra*.

Q. *Is it still a matter of luck, even if one has developed bodhicitta, to find a Guru?*

A. No, one has to search. One can always find a Guru from whom to receive teachings.

Q. *What should a person do if he doesn't find a Guru?*

A. He should search more!

Q. *What is the annuttarayogatantra?*

A. There are four classes of tantra of which *anuttarayoga* is the very highest. Briefly, it is the practice in which every act of one's life – even eating, bathing, and so on – everything that you do, every action in worldly existence both during your meditation and while you are not meditating, everything, every action is transformed into the path.

Q. *Does Buddhist practice mean we have to renounce the material world?*

A. According to *Hinayana* and *Mahayana*, yes – but according to *Mantrayana*, not necessarily.

Q. *By renunciation, you mean going to the mountains and living like a hermit? Can we continue to live in cities and still practice?*

A. Certainly, in *Mantrayana*. This is why Lord Buddha taught the *Mantrayana* to King *Indrabhuti*.

Q. *Why then is monasticism important?*

A. Monasticism is important to keep the tradition alive, to keep the teaching properly. When you stay in the world you can still practice, perhaps very effectively, but generally there is too much potential for distraction in the material world, and lay people don't have the time to practice properly or to study the teachings effectively. They have too many other things to attend to. Monks have a much better opportunity to practice and study *Dharma*, as they have nothing else to attend to.