Chapter 11 Personal Reflections on the Path

My Day

People often ask me about my daily schedule and Dharma practice. I am a very poor practitioner, but I keep trying because I am convinced that practicing the Dharma is the path to peace and happiness. In Dharamsala, India, where I live, I wake up at 3:30 a.m. and immediately visualise the Buddha and recite a verse of homage written by Nāgārjuna:

> Enthused by great compassion,
> you taught the exalted Dharma
> to dispel all [wrong] views.
> To you, Gautama, I prostrate.[84]

This verse is especially meaningful to me because it points out the Buddha's compassionate motivation that led him to identify ignorance as the cause of duḥkha and then to attain the wisdom realising the ultimate nature to dispel that ignorance. Ignorance is not a mere lack of knowledge; it is a distorted apprehension that grasps as existing what doesn't exist—inherent existence. Bodhicitta then spurred him to accumulate merit, purify his mind, and hear, think, and meditate on the Dharma. In that way, he became an awakened teacher with the ability to liberate sentient beings by giving faultless teachings.

Reflecting in this way increases my confidence in the Buddha and in the path I practice to transform my mind. It also helps me to appreciate my precious human life with many fortunate qualities: I live in a place and time where the Buddha has appeared and his teachings still exist and I have belief in things worthy of respect such as ethical conduct, concentration and wisdom. Recalling this daily enables me to maintain a joyful attitude immune to depression and discouragement.

After reciting this verse three times, I visualise Buddha Vajradhara dissolving into me and inspiring my mind. This gives me a feeling of courage and the willingness to persevere in my practice. I then generate bodhicitta and remind myself that I can surely see transformation happening within myself, although it may be small. This encourages me to rejoice in my virtue and continue practicing.

To clear the fogginess of sleep from my mind, I recite Mañjuśrī's mantra, *Oṃ a ra pa ca na dhīḥ*,[85] and then recite dhīḥ as many times as possible with one breath, imagining Mañjuśrī's wisdom in the form of the syllable dhīḥ absorbing into a dhīḥ at the back of my tongue. While meditating on Mañjuśrī like this, I reflect on the four truths of the āryas, especially the liberating power of true paths and the peace that comes with actualising true cessations.

Then I begin prostrations and daily recitations followed by a glance meditation, in which I recite and contemplate verses sequentially outlining the complete stages of the path to awakening. After that, I do formal meditation, predominantly analytical meditation to increase my understanding of the Buddha's teachings. Here my efforts are mainly directed to meditation on dependent arising and emptiness as well as on compassion and bodhicitta. I also do the tantric practice of deity yoga, which involves imagining transforming death, the intermediate state between one life and the next and rebirth into the three bodies of a buddha.

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[84] Sometimes I change the last line of the verse to say, "May I be inspired by Gautama Buddha."

[85] Tibetans pronounce this Om ah ra pa tsa na dhi.

I continue meditating (taking breaks, including breakfast and exercise) until about 8:30 a.m. If there is no office work, I study Dharma texts. I take delight in reading Indian and Tibetan treatises and commentaries repeatedly, each time discovering something new. There's a Tibetan saying, "If you read a book nine times, you will have nine understandings." Because this has been my experience, I will continue studying until the end of my life and recommend that others do likewise.

Often my study is interrupted because I am needed in the office. Lunch is just before noon, and after that I go to the office to work. My afternoons are filled with appointments, one right after the other. As a Buddhist monk, I don't eat dinner, and around 8:30 p.m., I go to sleep. I sleep very soundly, without any sleeping pills, and enjoy very peaceful meditation.

One teaching of the Kadam masters called the "four entrustments" especially touches my heart:

> Entrust your mind to Dharma practice;
> entrust your Dharma practice to a life of poverty;
> entrust your life of poverty to death;
> and entrust your death to an empty cave.[86]

These lines speak of completely giving ourselves to cultivation of the two bodhicittas (conventional and ultimate) making this the most important activity in our lives, so much so that we are willing to give all our life's energies to it, from now until our death. Relinquishing attachment to the eight worldly concerns,[87] our mind experiences so much joy and satisfaction with the freedom the Dharma bestows that money and reputation are of no concern to us. When I reflect on this verse, tears come to my eyes because this is my highest aspiration. It also reflects the greatest challenge in my life—balancing meditative cultivation with directly benefiting others in this life. Both are aspects of Dharma practice and our inner development. The pressing needs of people right now are important, but meditative practice beckons, and the need to deepen my own practice in order to benefit others more is also essential. Perhaps some of you also live with this tension in your lives.

Occasionally, I am able to do a retreat. During this time, I practice the visualisation of deities and maṇḍalas and the recitation of mantras, but mainly I read and contemplate the great Indian texts. Being able to study and reflect on the meaning of these magnificent texts is a great treat for me.

Gradual Progress

Just as the Buddha was able to gradually transform his mind, we can as well. In my own life, I see progress from the time I was a child until now. Because I grew up in a Buddhist family and in a Buddhist country where everyone repeated, "I take refuge in the Buddha," I have had faith in the Buddha since I was young. Although at that time I didn't have much understanding of the Dharma, I knew the Buddha was an extraordinary human being.

I came to the Potala Palace in Lhasa at age five, and my studies began when I was seven. My older brother and I studied together under the direction of our tutor, but as a young child I liked to play. The tutor had a whip, so I studied out of fear. Actually, the tutor had two whips, an ordinary whip and a gold whip that was for beating a holy person. But there was no holy pain!

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[86] See book 'Wisdom of Kadam Masters' in Books

[87] See footnote 46 page 66.

When I was a little older, I began to study the lamrim, the stages of the path. This caused me to have a deep interest in the Buddhadharma and increased my confidence in the Three Jewels as authentic refuges. When I was fifteen or sixteen, my enthusiasm to practice the Dharma grew. Occasionally, when I received teachings or meditated, I felt very moved by the Dharma.

My education involved memorising root texts and listening to my teachers' word-by-word explanations of them. I was tutored by seven debate masters from different monastic colleges. My Mongolian debate master was especially interested in emptiness, so in preparation for my geshe exams in 1958–59, I had to study many texts on that topic. We planned to visit southern Tibet on pilgrimage after my exams in March, 1959, and I would study Tsongkhapa's Essence of Eloquence then. However, on March 10, everything changed, and we fled Tibet and became refugees in India. I took some texts with me—Śāntideva's Engaging in the Bodhisattvas' Deeds, Tsongkhapa's Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path, his Essence of Eloquence, and others—and studied whenever possible.

In my late twenties in Tibet and my early thirties in Dharamsala, I studied, contemplated, and meditated on emptiness more seriously. I became more convinced of the possibility of attaining nirvāṇa, and my confidence in the Dharma Jewel—true cessations and true paths—deepened. That led me to see the Saṅgha—those beings who have realised this Dharma directly—as magnificent and increased my admiration for them. This in turn helped me develop deeper, genuine faith in the Buddha as our teacher. At that time, the thought arose in my mind that if I could actualise nirvāṇa, I could then have a long, blissful rest!

I have high regard for **bodhicitta** and it is not difficult to understand, however actually generating it seems challenging. My experience tallies with what the great masters say: emptiness is difficult to understand; it is especially challenging to maintain the tension between appearance and emptiness and to establish the efficacy of cause and effect in a world that is merely imputed and lacks any existence from its own side. However, when we think about emptiness and dependent arising over time, they become clearer, and we gain some feeling for them and confidence in them. Bodhicitta, on the other hand, is easy to understand but difficult to experience. But there is no other choice. We have to make the effort.

Even in my dreams I would often discuss the Dharma with people or meditate on emptiness and bodhicitta. In the last few years, I have had more interest and enthusiasm in understanding emptiness, and that has brought deeper conviction and experience. Once I read in a text, "the person is mere designation," and a feeling like electricity shook me. I thought that perhaps this was selflessness. When I focused on the self, I could confirm that it was merely designated, but when I focused on the aggregates,[88] the experience was not the same. That indicated that my experience was of the absence of a self-sufficient substantially existent person, not the emptiness of inherent existence.

Today my understanding of selflessness has improved, and that helps greatly to reduce the intensity and frequency of the afflictions, especially attachment and anger. Understanding emptiness has no adverse effect on the practice of authentic love and compassion because these are not driven by ignorance. In fact, under-

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[88] Note 72 page 85 fundamental concepts that describe the constituents of a sentient being's experience and existence. The aggregates are the building blocks of personality and the objects of clinging, and to the perception of a self. Understanding the nature of the aggregates is essential for developing insight into the nature of reality.

standing emptiness boosts our altruism by enabling us to recognise sentient beings' suffering more clearly. **Contemplation of emptiness and compassion are the backbone of my daily practice.**

I do not expect deeper understanding or experience to come in a short period of time. Ten, twenty, thirty or more years of practice are necessary, but change will definitely occur when we make consistent effort. Some of you may not live another twenty or thirty years, but if you pay serious attention and make yourself familiar with emptiness and bodhicitta, you will put many positive imprints of these topics on your subtle consciousness. I have seen this in my own experience. Some Buddhist topics are easy for me to understand, but when I discuss these with some senior scholars, these topics can appear difficult for them. This indicates some familiarity with these topics in my previous lives. So even if you are old now, whatever positive imprints you put on your mindstream from studying and contemplating for even a few months or years will carry on to your next life and benefit you.

All the virtuous actions you do now will certainly enable you to have a human rebirth and live in a conducive environment where there is more opportunity to learn and practice the Buddha's teachings. Those who are old like me should not excuse themselves by thinking that now they're very old and nothing can be done. The result of thinking like this will be not achieving anything. So please make as much of an effort as you can while you have this precious life.

Those of you who are young have more time to study and practice. Think seriously about what is important in your life, and put effort into the Dharma. Of course, whether you practice is up to you. If you have genuine interest, practice is very worthwhile. Please give this serious thought.

Some followers of other religions or spiritual traditions may read this book out of curiosity. Please continue with your current practice. The Buddha never imposed his beliefs on anyone. Each individual has complete freedom to follow whatever religion he or she chooses or to follow no faith at all. But whatever you do, be a kind human being.

In Montserrat, Spain, I met a Catholic monk who spent five years as a hermit meditating in the mountains behind the monastery. He told me that his main practice was meditating on love. When I looked into his eyes, there was some special feeling there. I admire and respect him greatly. His life shows that if we meditate for five years, some result will definitely come. Similarly, if we make daily effort to train our mind, the wild monkey of our mind will be subdued.

Cultivating Bodhicitta

In my twenties, I appreciated bodhicitta, but it seemed far away. In 1967, with Ling Rinpoche's permission, I requested teachings from Khunu Lama Rinpoche on Engaging in the Bodhisattvas' Deeds. After that, bodhicitta felt closer, and it became obvious that self-centredness is the basis for fear and distrust. When our basic attitude is altruistic, then even if anger arises, it leaves quickly. It's like our mind has a strong immune system that protects it from the illness of the afflictions.

Around that time, I also studied another marvellous text, Nāgārjuna's Precious Garland,[89] and a few other supplementary books and every day I thought about and meditated on them. Because I already had strong admiration and faith in Nāgārjuna from contemplating his teachings on emptiness, even reading a short

[89] In Books

passage from his writings has a profound impact on me.

Of the thirteen great classical texts,[90] I received the oral transmission on Maitreya's Ornament of Clear Realisations and Candrakīrti's Supplement to the Middle Way from Ling Rinpoche. The oral transmissions of the other eleven treatises I received from Khunu Lama Rinpoche. In addition to being a great, yet humble, practitioner, he was a remarkable scholar and teacher. His teachings were very precise, and he could easily cite many passages from the scriptures. His translations from both Tibetan and Sanskrit were impeccable. When I received teachings on Śāntideva's work, he often mentioned, "Here the Tibetan translation is wrong. The original Sanskrit says this . . ." I made these corrections in my own copy and incorporate them now when I teach that text.

My teacher Ling Rinpoche was very kind to me. He would encourage me in my practice, telling me that if I put in effort, I could gain realisations. But if I were to see Ling Rinpoche now, I would have to confess that I still have not attained those realisations, even though many years have passed.

Around 1970, my feeling for bodhicitta became more intimate. After some time, I became convinced that if I had enough time to meditate, I could become a bodhisattva within this life. However, I don't have sufficient time. That is my excuse. But for those with sufficient time, there is no excuse!

I continue receiving teachings on bodhicitta and doing analytical meditation on it. Sometimes when I meditate on bodhicitta in my room, I am so deeply moved that tears come. During one period of my life, I would do lengthy meditation sessions on bodhicitta and emptiness, and almost every day I would have strong experiences and be very touched. At the end of his Essence of Eloquence, Tsongkhapa says that when he reflects deeply on what he has learned, his faith in the Buddha increases even more. Sometimes his recollection of the kindness of the Nālandā masters overpowers him with appreciation for the teachings on emptiness and other times reflecting on the suffering of sentient beings overwhelms him with compassion. He comments that it is almost as if these two feelings were competing with each other. While I do not have Tsongkhapa's realisations, at times I too am affected in the same way as he was when reflecting on emptiness and bodhicitta.

Now when I teach about bodhicitta, I feel very moved. That means my mind is more receptive and has grown closer to bodhicitta. My understanding of these topics has changed considerably. This confirms that the possibility of attaining awakening exists. Due to knowledge, examination and some experience, my faith in the Three Jewels is firm and deep. The Buddha's marvellous teachings on infinite altruism and the wisdom of reality is indeed a living tradition. However, my experience of Tantrayāna (path based on Tantra) is lacking.

During one period, when meditating on tantric practices such as Guhyasamāja, I focused on the generation stage, which involves dissolving oneself into emptiness and reemerging as the deity. I would try to maintain a stable continuity of this visualisation and develop single-pointed concentration on it. When reflecting on the self, I would train to immediately think of myself as the deity, without any thought or appearance of the ordinary I.

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[90] These are the Prātimokṣa Sūtra, Vinayasūtra by Guṇaprabha, Treasury of Knowledge by Vasubandhu, Compendium of Knowledge by Asaṅga, Treatise on the Middle Way by Nāgārjuna, Four Hundred by Āryadeva, Supplement to the Middle Way by Candrakīrti, Engaging in the Bodhisattvas' Deeds by Śāntideva, and Maitreya's five treatises.

In the late 1970s, I became very busy with my responsibilities to my students and the Tibetan community. Due to lack of time, I had to discontinue my long meditation sessions and now I have fallen back to my previous level of experience. Born in 1935, I am old; maybe it is too late to practice much more. The Tibetan community in exile now has an elected government and I want them to carry out all the governmental and administrative responsibilities. In 2011 I was able to resign my post in the government in the hope of having more time for practice.

But I still have many visitors and appointments. I can't refuse to meet the Tibetans who have endured so much hardship to come from Tibet to see me. I can't ignore them and say "I am in retreat" when they have risked their lives to come all this way to see me. The purpose of doing retreat is to benefit others. Meeting these people brings some benefit to them, so this is part of my practice. I think the rest of my life will go like this. Although I'm sad not to have the chance to do more retreat, my greatest source of inspiration is Śāntideva's verse:

> As long as space endures,
> and as long as sentient beings remain,
> so too will I abide
> to dispel the misery of the world.

Whether I attain buddhahood or not in this one simple existence is not important; I must at least benefit others, especially when they have problems. Bodhicitta compels me to do this.

The First Dalai Lama, Gendun Drup, spent a long time in retreat. During this time, he had visions of White Tārā and Green Tārā and wrote very moving and meaningful praises to them. After his retreat, he voluntarily began to do more work, some of it difficult and time-consuming: he gave daily teachings on different texts to his students, and he established Tashi Lhunpo Monastery in Shigatse. By that time, he was already an old monk with white hair and a cane, but he was the architect and foreman who oversaw the construction of the monastery. He also sent people out to collect donations so the monastery could be built. Then, despite his age, as the manager of the monastery, he gave instructions on the daily operation of the monastery and the monks' discipline.

One of his main disciples then reminded him, "It was prophesied that you would go directly to a pure land. Will you do that?"Gendun Drup replied, "I have no wish to go to these higher places. My only wish is to go to troubled areas where I can serve." That is very wonderful! That truly inspires me!

The Buddha's tradition is a living tradition. If we practice, we can transform ourselves. This occurs not through merely praying but through meditating, principally doing analytical meditation. Buddhist practices use our human intelligence in the greatest way to develop the maximum potential of a good heart.

Willingness to Undergo Hardship

When we look at the life of our teacher, Śākyamuni Buddha, we notice that he went through a process of spiritual development. Born as a prince, he later gave up the comforts of royal life and became a monastic in order to pursue his spiritual practice. He endured the disapproval of his father and the poor living conditions that his wandering lifestyle entailed. He also did six years of severe, ascetic spiritual practice. After all this, he displayed the act of attaining full awakening.

His life exemplifies the necessity to be able to bear hardship in spiritual pursuit. This is true of the lives of the teachers of many other spiritual traditions as well. The message we receive from the examples of their lives is that we, as the follow-

ers of these teachers, must be willing to go through hardship and persevere in order to realise our spiritual aspirations.

Sometimes the thought remains in the back of our minds, "Yes, the Buddha went through so many hardships to attain awakening, but I don't need to do this. Somehow I'll be able to attain awakening without having to give up the comforts and luxury that I'm attached to." Although we may not say it, thinking in this way indicates we believe that we are more fortunate than the Buddha. While he had to go through so many hardships, we feel we can attain the same spiritual realisations without having to live ascetically and endure difficulties as he did. This is mistaken.

The Buddha taught the middle way, a path avoiding the extremes of severe asceticism and heedless indulgence. We must be willing to give up pleasures to which we are attached if we are to penetrate the nature of reality and open our hearts with bodhicitta toward all beings. Our priorities must be clear: Which do we value more, our present comfort and security or spiritual liberation? Are we willing to undergo the physical and emotional hardships of relinquishing our attachments in order to practice the spiritual path? These questions we must reflect deeply.

Each of us will face different hardships along the path. For some people, the challenge will not be living a simple lifestyle but enduring the criticism of family and society. Others will face having to practice despite health issues and some must deal with strong sexual cravings. We must develop the internal fortitude to persevere in our practice no matter what the suffering—physical, emotional, or mental.

Keeping a Happy Mind

It is important to keep a happy mind when practicing Dharma. Buoyancy, enthusiasm and joy are needed to maintain our practice; these cannot exist in a mind weighed down by depression. People ask me how I maintain a happy mind and relaxed demeanour even though I have been a refugee for over fifty years. One news reporter asked me why I wasn't angry given the fact that I have witnessed so much destruction in my native land and to my people. I looked at her and replied, "What good would it do to be angry? I wouldn't sleep well or be able to digest my food. Plus my anger wouldn't change the situation at all!" I suppose she assumed I would take the opportunity to tell the world about the sufferings of the Tibetans under the Communist Chinese and was astonished when I didn't.

Although we may experience happiness when the mind is non-virtuous—eg, the pleasure that arises when our craving is satisfied or when we have exacted revenge on someone who hurt us—that happiness does not help us on the path to awakening and should be abandoned. I don't think we are really happy then.

Other experiences of happiness are rooted in virtuous mental states. When I am generous and can relieve the poverty of others, I feel good inside. The ability to live ethically with a nonviolent attitude makes me rejoice and generates a sense of well-being. Having lovingkindness toward others brings pleasure in the mind, and doing my daily meditation practices, which deepens my refuge in the Three Jewels, brings great inner satisfaction. It is also said that gaining meditative stabilisation suffuses the mind with bliss.

We are often distracted from the Dharma by sensory stimuli—attractive or repulsive sights, sounds, smells, tastes or physical sensations. But when our mind of attachment doesn't have enough sense stimuli, we are bored. People who are very involved with the external world of the five senses often find themselves in this predicament and are frequently dissatisfied, whereas those who derive happiness

from internal qualities—faith, love, compassion, wisdom, and so forth—experience much joy and contentment. They are not swept away by goings on of people in the environment around them. Too much sensory input makes us exhausted. It is better to watch our mind. I don't watch TV or explore the Internet, although I do listen to BBC news on the radio so know what is going on in the lives of other sentient beings. Listening to the news becomes a kind of meditation on karma and its effects and inspires me to cultivate compassion.

In my own practice, I weed out the unwholesome states that bring some sort of temporary, polluted pleasure and instead put energy into cultivating wholesome mental states. That enables me to keep a happy mind—which is important for practicing the Dharma—even in difficult situations.

Realised Beings

Some people ask me if I know people who have attained full awakening. The Buddha stipulated that unless there is great purpose in revealing one's realisations, one should not do so. Speaking of one's own spiritual attainments is an infraction of the monastic precepts and proclaiming realisations that one does not have is a root downfall, such that one is no longer a monastic. Falsely proclaiming one has realised emptiness is a root downfall of the bodhisattva ethical code. Thus proclaiming one's realisation publicly is unheard of among true Buddhist practitioners.

However, I have had the opportunity to meet people who have experienced extraordinary development and may be near buddhahood. Meeting these people demonstrates teachings are alive and gives us great inspiration and determination. Hence, refuge in the Saṅgha— highly realised beings—strengthens our practice.

In the remainder of this section, I **(Chodron)** would like to explain further why realised beings do not discuss their attainments, especially nowadays when people make great effort to proclaim their good qualities and accomplishments. First, speaking about attainments has a deleterious effect on our practice. As soon as someone begins to talk about spiritual experiences publicly, words begin to replace experience. The actual feeling of the experience fades in the mind, and we become expert in telling a fascinating story. It is easy to become arrogant and complacent if we attain celebrity as a spiritual luminary. For the sake of our personal practice, it is best to remain and modest.

Spiritually immature people easily confuse an unusual meditation experience for spiritual realisation. Even if their intentions are good, if they proclaim their spiritual prowess and begin to instruct others, naive people can easily be led astray and follow an incorrect path. Then, if that teacher's veneer cracks, the followers will be deeply disillusioned and may even abandon following a spiritual path. Teachers who make no special claim to greatness avoid being made false idols by followers.

Say someone with actual attainments were to announce them publicly, what would come of it? Many people would worship that person instead of listening to their teachings. Imagine if the Buddha appeared in New York with a body of radiant, golden light. People would be so struck by amazement that they would stare at him and wait for him to perform miraculous feats. The media would want to interview him and soon there would be a new line of apparel named after him.

If someone has genuine, stable realisations, receptive people with merit will discern this and have faith in that person. Humble behaviour is a sign of spiritual attainment. People with genuine realisations have no need for praise, reputation,

glamour and perks. Their main interest is in stabilising and enhancing their realisations and benefiting others.

What I Have Learned in Life

Someone once asked me, “You have lived many decades now. Please sum up the most important things you have learned in life.” I paused to reflect. Of course, I have had many different kinds of experience—as a citizen in my own country and as a refugee, as a young person and now as an older one, as a student and as a leader. In Buddhism we always pray for the welfare of all sentient beings no matter their life form; this has had great impact on me. In all situations and with a wide variety of people, **I regard everyone as being fundamentally the same: each of us wishes to be happy and to be free from suffering.** Thinking like this, I immediately feel close to others wherever I go; there is no barrier between us.

As a result of meeting many different kinds of people and also due to the experience that age brings, I act in an informal manner with everyone and talk to others as one human being to another. This attitude and behaviour eliminate any ground for anxiety. On the other hand, if I thought, “I am the Dalai Lama and a Buddhist monk, so I should act a certain way and people should treat me in a particular way,” that would foster anxiety and resentment. So I forget about such distinctions and see that I am just a human being who is meeting another human being. On the emotional level, we are the same. On the mental and physical levels, we are also the same. It is helpful for me to think in this way, and it also puts others at ease. Sometimes at the beginning of a meeting or a conversation, people are very reserved and stiff, but within a few minutes that is gone and we feel very close.