Chapter 9 Tools for the Path

To practice the Dharma successfully, more than information and a meditation cushion are required. We need a proper motivation and good, practical advice that will help to overcome hindrances. This chapter speaks of the mental tools we will need to progress along the path, such as faith and wisdom. We'll also explore the role of prayers and rituals, of purification and the collection of merit, and of memorisation and debate in cultivating the three wisdoms: the wisdoms arising from learning, reflecting on the teachings, and meditating on them.

General Advice

Learning the Dharma is different from learning subjects in school. Not only is our motivation different—we seek the method to attain fortunate rebirths, liberation, or awakening—but also the methodology is different. Our spiritual mentors present topics that are comparatively easy to understand as well as those that are more challenging in the same Dharma talk. Sometimes their response to our questions leads to more confusion. Our mentors instruct us to think about the topic and discuss it with others, but we want them to give us the right answer. Unlike academic studies in the West, where we are expected to remember and understand everything our teacher says so that we can pass a test, this is not the case in Dharma education. While we should try to remember and reflect on the salient points of a lecture, we are not expected to understand all the intricacies of a topic at once. Teachers explain a topic to "plant seeds" in our mindstreams so that we will become familiar with the vocabulary. Having heard the topic once, the next time we hear it, we will be able to focus on the concepts being presented. By hearing and reflecting on a teaching repeatedly, our understanding and ability to integrate the meaning into our lives will gradually increase.

Understanding the Dharma is not dependent on worldly intelligence. Some people who are brilliant in academic studies or worldly affairs have great difficulty understanding Dharma principles. On the other hand, some people who do not do well in school quickly catch the intent of the Buddha and practice diligently. For this reason, we should not be arrogant because we have worldly intelligence and not put ourselves down if we lack it.

We need to be patient with ourselves and let go of unrealistic expectations of quick attainments. We should also avoid comparing ourselves to others and feeling proud that we are more advanced than our friends or lamenting that we lag behind them. Each person has different predispositions from previous lives, so no two people will progress at the same speed or in the same way. Comparison of this sort only breeds jealousy, arrogance, and competition, qualities that waste time and are not conducive for transforming our mind.

Similarly, due to karmic connections in previous lives, our friends may be drawn to a particular teacher who does not particularly inspire us and vice versa. Rather than be influenced by peer pressure, we must choose our teachers depending on the quality of guidance we receive from them and the depth of connection we feel with them. We should avoid comparing the practices our teachers instruct us to do with those our friends are prescribed. Because no two sentient beings are identical, the Buddha taught a wide variety of practices so people could find those suitable for them. That does not make one practice better and another worse; it simply means that one practice is more suitable for one person and a different practice for another person. At a buffet dinner, one person may like rice and another noodles.

Debating which is best, trying to convert our friends to our preference, or feeling out of place because we aren't attracted to the one our friends like are useless. The point is for each person to eat food that nourishes their body. We should study with the teachers who inspire us and practice in the way that works best for us.

Strong, continuous and stable spiritual experiences are more reliable than powerful, fleeting ones.

For most people, meditating in isolated retreat for years is not an option or even a preference. The vast majority of us need to balance Dharma study and sitting meditation with our daily-life activities. Formal, daily sitting practice enables us to deepen and integrate our understanding of the Dharma in a concentrated way, but the actual determining factor of the effectiveness of our practice manifests in our behaviour.[58] Incidents in our life show us which disturbing emotions we need to put more energy into taming in our sitting practice.

People often ask how to balance formal Dharma practice with actively engaging in projects that benefit others. If you are a householder, "fifty-fifty" is a good balance. How this balance manifests in your life will change according to circumstances. Be flexible. Stabilise your compassion through formal practice and express it through active service to others. Work at transforming your motivation, thus making your daily activities part of the Dharma path.

If you feel stressed by your service work for others or become angry at or disappointed in the people you are trying to help, step back, rest and take more time for personal practice. During your meditation, focus on developing a compassionate motivation, fortitude and joyous effort. Learn to accept the limits of change you can enact in a world under the influence of afflictions and polluted karma.

Sometimes we go too far in the other direction, becoming complacent in our Dharma studies or a stagnant meditation practice. If so, contemplate impermanence, death and the suffering of sentient beings to reinvigorate your compassion.

REFLECTION

1. A balanced life entails sharing our time among many activities: Dharma practice, socially engaged projects that benefit others, work, caring for friends and family, exercise, and other activities.
2. What is a practical way to prioritise these activities in your life?
3. Given your talents and limitations, think of a realistic way to apportion your time and energy that will bring you satisfaction, not stress.

Wisdom and Faith

Wisdom and faith complement and reinforce each other on the path. Faith enables us to be inspired and receptive and wisdom gives us a clear mind that understands both conventional existence and ultimate reality.

Wisdom is an analytical mind that deeply understands its object, such as impermanence or selflessness. Analysis is not intellectual gymnastics used to impress others; it involves deep investigation into the nature of objects and leads to understanding and knowledge.

The English word *faith* does not have the same connotation as the Sanskrit word it translates, *śraddhā*. To understand what faith is, we must look beyond our previous associations with the word. Faith is confidence and trust in the Three Jewels; not blind belief. A virtuous and joyous mental factor, it enriches our spiritual prac-

[58] There's the story of someone who meditated in an isolated cave for years and thought his practice was progressing well. But when he went down to the town to get supplies, someone criticised him; his anger immediately flared, and he began shouting at the other person.

tice and arises when we admire the Three Jewels, aspire to be like them, or deeply understand the teachings. Accordingly, the Mind and Awareness texts[59] speak of three types of faith or trust: admiring faith, aspiring faith, and believing faith.

Admiring faith arises when we learn about the excellent qualities of the Three Jewels or witness the good qualities of our spiritual mentors and admire them. It may also arise from reading the biographies of previous practitioners, contemplating their diligence and determination and reflecting on the difficulties they overcame to practice the Dharma. This faith clears away mental distress and makes the mind joyful. Authentic admiring faith is a vital aid on the path and serves to orient our efforts in a positive direction. In extreme cases, admiring faith could degenerate into blind faith, which has little value and may be dangerous.

Aspiring faith arises when we develop the wish to attain the excellent qualities of the Three Jewels. It arises from reflecting on the possibility of removing defilements and attaining liberation and gives purpose and energy to our practice. When we know the benefits of serenity and concentration, we have faith in them and aspire to attain them.

Believing faith is of two kinds. The first believes the truth of the Buddha's teachings because they were taught by the Buddha and our spiritual mentors and we trust them. This faith may arise due to reasons that we have only partially verified or without applying reasoning.

The second type of believing faith is based on conviction and arises after having examined and understood a teaching. Because it often involves a reasoning used to verify the topic, this faith is stable. Having contemplated the four truths for a long time, we become convinced that they accurately describe our predicament and how to remedy it. After studying and using reasoning to investigate the ultimate nature of phenomena, we experience a calm conviction that all persons and phenomena are empty of inherent existence. We are confident that by realising this directly, we will be able to uproot the self-grasping ignorance that is the source of all duḥkha. In these examples, believing faith is directed toward the Dharma Jewel—true paths and true cessations. From this, firm confidence in the Buddha and the Saṅgha Jewels easily follow. Such faith borne of conviction stabilises our practice, enabling us to pursue the Dharma in depth.

Tsongkhapa illustrates this second type of believing faith arising from reason in his "Praise to Dependent Arising":

> Having seen the truth, you taught it.
> Those following you will leave all troubles far behind,
> for they will cut to the root of every fault.
>
> However, those outside your teachings,
> though they practice long and hard,
> are those who beckon back faults,
> for they are welded to views of self.
>
> Ah! When the wise see the difference,
> how could they not revere you
> from the very depths of their hearts!

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59 "Mind and Awareness" texts explore the nature of the mind (*sem*) and phenomena (*chos*). These texts look at how the mind perceives and interacts with the world, distinguishing between different types of consciousness and mental factors. They provide a foundation for understanding perception, cognition and development of wisdom in the Buddhist path. Titles include "The Mind and its Functions" by Geshe Rabten & "Awareness and Emptiness: Songs of Nagarjuna" translated by Susanne Fairclough. Commentary by the Dalai Lama,"Kindness, Clarity, and Insight,".

The second type of believing faith arises from deep conviction that is born from clearly knowing and analysing the distinction between the Buddha's teachings and those of masters who adhere to views of inherent existence[60]. After examining both teachings with discerning wisdom and clearly seeing the truth in the Buddha's teachings, the wise have no choice but to feel great faith, trust, and respect for the Buddha. Tsongkhapa expresses this with these moving words:

> Alas! My mind was defeated by ignorance.
> Though I've sought refuge for a long time
> in such an embodiment of excellence,
> I possess not a fraction of his qualities.
>
> Nonetheless, before the stream of this life
> flowing toward death has come to cease,
> that I have found slight faith in you—
> even this I think is fortunate.

In the first verse, "qualities" refers to insight into emptiness. Tsongkhapa acknowledges that for a long time ignorance has obscured his mind. Yet due to gaining some understanding of emptiness, he experienced faith based on conviction in the doctrine of emptiness taught by the Buddha with great compassion. Considering how few people encounter teachings on emptiness and among those, how few gain even a modest understanding of it, Tsongkhapa felt fortunate to trust the truth of non-inherent existence. Pondering this will increase our aspiring faith and motivate us to practice like the Buddha did and attain the same depth of realisation.

Learn the teachings well and use reason to reflect on their meaning. If you do not find any logical fallacies or contradictions, you will have believing faith in the path and the possibility of attaining it. That faith will help increase your trust in those topics that cannot be understood completely through factual inference, ie the intricacies of karma and its effects. Believing that actions bring concordant results is sufficient to help us curb destructive actions and act constructively, thus accumulating merit, which aids the increase of wisdom. In Buddhism, wisdom and faith are not contradictory and increase each other when cultivated properly.

Haribhadra, in a commentary on Maitreya's Ornament of Clear Realisations, speaks of having faith in both the Three Jewels and those treatises that take the Three Jewels as their subject matter. Although many people have admiring faith in the Three Jewels, not many have faith in the treatises that discuss them. Faith in the treatises and their authors leads us to study the texts, which increases our knowledge of the Three Jewels. This, in turn, promotes contemplating and then meditating on the meaning that we learned, thereby deepening both our wisdom and believing faith. These are essential factors for our awakening.

There is no fixed order in which faith and wisdom arise. According to individual tendencies, faith may give rise to wisdom, wisdom may lead to faith, or they may occur simultaneously.

Stabilising our faith increases our resilience. Stable faith is not affected by the opinions of others and prevents discouragement when viewing others' wrongdoings. Our faith in the Buddha's teachings will not falter should we find a statement in the scriptures or one said by our teacher with which we initially disagree. Instead, we will continue to investigate.

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[60] Inherent existence. Existence without depending on any other factors; independent existence. vs Dependent arising.

REFLECTION

1. Find examples in your own experience of the three types of faith.
2. How does each one contribute to your internal happiness?
3. How can you gently increase your faith and trust in the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha?

Proper Practice[61]

Buddhism is a path of self-reliance not one of propitiating an external god or deity to give us material goods, reputation, or spiritual realisations.[62]

Expecting an external holy being to remove our suffering and make us a buddha is a wrong view. Improper understanding of prayers in Tibetan liturgy can lead to this idea; we request to the assembly of holy beings, "Please grant me blessings to generate compassion." This is a skilful way of focusing our energy by identifying what is important. However, we cannot simply make offerings to the gurus and deities, request them to grant us blessings and then sit back and have a cup of tea, thinking they will do all the work!

The buddhas have such great compassion for sentient beings that if they could have eliminated our suffering and given us realisations, they would have done so by now. However, our progress along the path depends on our creating the appropriate causes. Our own effort is crucial. Just as another person cannot sleep for us so that we'll feel well rested, no one else can transform our mind for us. Nevertheless, innumerable holy beings are trying to assist and guide us on the path. But do we pay attention to their guidance—the teachings they give us?

If we call ourselves Buddhists and seek protection from suffering, we should rely on the Buddha's teachings, the Dharma. By putting the teachings into practice, we abandon harmful actions, purify those done in the past and engage in constructive actions—this is the best protection. If we do not observe the law of karma and its effects, we can make extensive offerings to protectors, chant innumerable pūjās in deep, melodic voices, beat drums and ring bells, but misery will still befall us because we have created the cause for it. However, if we act ethically, even if others try to harm us, they will not succeed because we will have removed the causes that make us vulnerable to it.

The Tibetan word *byin rlabs* that is translated as "**blessing**" or "inspiration" literally means "to transform into magnificence" or "to transform by magnificence." We receive blessing through a combination of the holy being's teachings and our practice, not through an external power causing us to have an extraordinary experience. The real sense of "blessing" is a transformation of mind from an unwholesome state to a wholesome one. Indications that our mind has been inspired and transformed are that our fear lessens, our temper calms and our tolerance and respect for others increase.

As a sincere Buddhist, do not seek magnificent mystical experiences to boast about to your friends but instead try to become a better human being. If you do that, you will automatically benefit others and improve the world.

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[61] I am concerned that these days people rely too much on admiring faith and do not understand or cultivate it properly. Some people have great devotion but minimal interest in study. Many years ago I went to Singapore, and the Buddhists there greeted me with much devotion. Some of them touched my clothes or my body believing they would receive some blessing, but when I explained the Buddhadharma, few of them were interested. I prefer when people are very attentive at teachings and want to learn. They take notes and record the teachings and refer to them later.

[62] Tibetans often have statues of protector deities on their altars and store their valuables in the cabinets below. I joke with them that it appears that they pray to the protectors on top of the cabinet to protect the worldly goods inside the cabinet! This is not Buddhist practice.

Purification and Collection of Merit

Merit is virtuous karma or goodness created by restraining from harmful actions and cultivating constructive ones. It leads to good results in cyclic existence and enriches our minds with positive energy that enables gaining spiritual realisations. Merit cannot be seen with our eyes or measured. Yet it acts as support for both wisdom and faith to grow in our minds and enables our practice to be successful.

If we lack merit, our efforts to cultivate wisdom may result in a corrupt intelligence that reaches the wrong conclusions. Some people are extremely intelligent, but because they are excessively skeptical and critical, they reflexively criticise reasonable theories and beneficial practices. Nihilistic and cynical, they act in ways that harm themselves and others.

A lack of merit impedes integrating the Dharma in our lives. Some Buddhists study the scriptures extensively and are excellent debaters and great logicians. They can explain the meaning of many scriptures, but their knowledge has not transformed their minds and their everyday conduct lacks discipline. This indicates corruption of intelligence due to lack of merit and proper faith. To cultivate wisdom that is capable of transforming our mind, we must accumulate merit and generate faith based on understanding the meaning of the teachings.

In ancient India, the great non-Buddhist masters who debated complex issues with Buddhists must have had well-developed knowledge of the Buddhist view of these topics, else they would not have been able to debate them. However, they had no conviction in the veracity of the Buddhist views; knowledge does not always lead to conviction. Gaining a deep understanding of the Buddha's teachings beyond intellectual comprehension depends on having accumulated merit.

Purifying ourselves of negativities (destructive actions and harmful thoughts) is also important. Done by means of the four opponent powers—regret; taking refuge and generating bodhicitta; resolving not to do the action again; and engaging in remedial behaviour (purification cleanses the mind of impediments). The mind is like a field. Just as we must remove debris from a field and add fertiliser so that the seeds we plant can grow, we perform purification and collect merit so that the seeds of Dharma planted in our minds during teachings can grow into a vast harvest of Dharma realisations.

To do that, the great masters advise us to do certain preparatory practices, such as **the seven-limb prayer**, at the beginning of meditation sessions to purify and collect merit. These seven limbs are: (1) performing prostrations, (2) making offerings, (3) confessing our misdeeds, (4) rejoicing in our own and others' virtue, (5) requesting our teachers to teach the Dharma, (6) imploring the buddhas to remain in the world, and (7) dedicating our merit for the awakening of all beings.

In addition, some practitioners engage in specific preliminary practices prior to doing tantric retreats in order to accumulate merit; for example, some do a hundred thousand maṇḍala offerings or recitations of Vajrasattva's mantra[63]. If we do these devotional practices with awareness that the factors composing them (the

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[63] Vajrasattva's mantra is a powerful Buddhist mantra associated with purification and the cleansing of negative karma. It is central to many Tibetan Buddhist practices, particularly those involving confession and purification. The mantra invokes the blessings of Vajrasattva, who embodies the purity of the enlightened mind, assisting practitioners in overcoming obstacles on the path to enlightenment. Due to the sacred nature of this mantra, it is traditionally received from a qualified teacher as part of one's spiritual practice.

agent, object, and action) arise dependently yet are empty of inherent existence, we also cultivate wisdom, which is the ultimate purifying agent.

Sometimes we feel stuck in our studies and practice. The mind is bored, unresponsive and dull, and we have difficulty understanding Dharma topics and focusing the mind on virtue. At such times, engaging in purification and the collection of merit is very effective to open the mind and make it receptive to the Dharma.[64]

Prayers and Rituals

Many people ask me to pray for them. Thousands of buddhas and gurus already pray for us, but because we do not practice sincerely, nothing happens. Our progress depends on our own effort, and I am always delighted when students sincerely practice to transform their minds. That is the best offering.

Bodhisattvas make a vast variety of aspirations and prayers and then strive to accomplish their aspirations.[65] Good relationships will elude us as long as we speak divisively, blame or criticise others. We should be like bodhisattvas and think about what causes will accomplish our prayers. If we create those causes, our prayers will bear fruit and we will be receptive to the stimulus of the Three Jewels.

When we request spiritual mentors or monastics to pray for us, from our side we should refrain from non-virtuous behaviour and act constructively. Their prayers can then be effective. To be effective, virtuous prayers and aspirations need three steps: prayers made; we engage in virtuous actions; and the Three Jewels add inspiration. In Prajñāvarman's commentary on the Udānavarga, the Buddha says:

> Buddhas do not wash away negativities with water,
> clear away beings' duḥkha with their hands,
> or transfer their realisations to other beings:
> they liberate them by teaching the truth of reality.

Buddhas cannot magically make everything go well in our lives and in the world. The main way they help us sentient beings is by teaching us how to create the causes for happiness and abandon the causes for suffering. Following their instructions (especially those on ethical conduct) is essential to alleviate duḥkha. We may recite thousands of prayers and mantras but if we do not use the Dharma tools to transform our minds, we are wasting time. As Dza Patrul Rinpoche says:

> Ritual sessions four times a day without the generation and completion stages,
> pounding drums & clashing cymbals without thinking of pure perception,
> droning mantras without any concentration:
> all that gets us no further on the path to liberation.

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[64] This is illustrated in the biography of Tsongkhapa. After practicing for many years, he had a meditative vision of Mañjuśrī, the buddha of wisdom, and was able to converse with him. He consulted Mañjuśrī regarding some difficult points about emptiness. Mañjuśrī answered his questions, but Tsongkhapa still did not understand. Mañjuśrī responded, "There is no way for me to explain it to you in an easier fashion. You will be able to understand only if you enhance your meditation with three factors. First, make heartfelt supplication to your guru, whom you regard as inseparable from your meditational deity. Second, engage in purification practices and accumulate merit. Third, study the treatises written by the great Indian masters and then reflect and meditate on them. With the help of these three, you will have a true insight into emptiness before long."

Tsongkhapa then went to do retreat at a hermitage near Ölka. There he made 3.5 million prostrations (a hundred thousand each to the thirty-five purification buddhas) and many thousands of maṇḍala offerings. In addition, he made requests to his guru, whom he viewed as having the same nature as his meditational deity, and continued to study the great treatises as advised by Mañjuśrī. The obstacles to his understanding of emptiness cleared and he realised the correct view. These three can rejuvenate our Dharma practice whenever our mind feels dry or obscured.

[65] Ordinary people pray to have a happy life but ignore Dharma practice, the source of happiness. They pray "May I be healthy" but eat junk food; they aspire to have good relationships with others but are careless about their speech.

The main purpose of rituals involving deity-yoga practice is to generate the union of method and wisdom. It is not to seek blessings, as if nirvāṇa were something external to us that our spiritual mentor or meditation deity could transfer into our mindstream. Making offerings to the saṅgha and requesting them to perform pūjās on our behalf to create merit, we should not think that we can "hire" someone to create merit, freeing us to continue to deceive customers at work or get drunk with our friends!

People easily believe that the performance of a ritual is an end to itself, not the mental change it is should invoke in the participants. This is precisely the attitude that the Buddha opposed during his life and that led to his disapproval of rites and rituals done simply for their own sake. Today it seems that people are going backward into this superstitious way and not forward to deeper, more genuine practice.

We should not be attributing our problems to external beings but to our own karma. I prefer that instead of prescribing pūjās, people should meditate on bodhicitta and emptiness, to deepen their refuge in the Three Jewels, or to reflect on the law of karma and its effects and engage in purification practices. These will definitely cure causes of suffering by transforming people's minds.

Study, Reflection, and Meditation

The sūtras speak of the threefold practice of study, critical reflection, and meditation and the understanding or wisdom that is developed by each one. Individually and together these three enable us to practice skilfully, avoid pitfalls and detours, and gain liberating realisations.

Study. In ancient times, the Buddha's teachings were passed down orally, so the first step in learning was to hear teachings. The broader meaning of "hearing" includes all forms of study, including reading and new forms of learning. Studying the sūtras and tantras (as well as treatises and commentaries by later sages) gives us the necessary information to know how to practice. Without this first, crucial step, we risk making up our own path or practicing incorrectly.

Many people are eager to meditate, which is commendable; but without proper study, they run the risk of going astray. They will not know how to meditate correctly, even if they have a strong aspiration to do so. Studying the teachings on emptiness, we learn the reasonings that prove phenomena are empty of inherent existence. Study reveals different perspectives on a topic, thereby increasing our mental flexibility and acuity. Then when we contemplate and meditate, we can look at the topic from many angles and see connections among diverse points. Knowing the paths and stages on the path to awakening enables us to assess our own progress when we are not able to consult our spiritual mentor. Hearing is not dry, intellectual learning. It is dynamic and sparks transformation in our mind.

One lama said that it is better to study scriptures one month than to do a one-month retreat meditating on and reciting the mantra of Mañjuśrī[66]. This illustrates the importance of study to gain wisdom. The Dharma is vast, and we should continue to learn its various aspects our entire lives. Our bodies may become old, but our minds can still be young and full of enthusiasm for learning. Whenever I have

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[66] The mantra of Mañjuśrī emphasises the importance of wisdom and faith in Buddhist practice. It states, "Due to having faith, one relies on the practices; due to having wisdom, one truly understands. Of these two, wisdom is foremost, but faith must come first". This mantra highlights the significance of cultivating both wisdom and faith in order to progress on the path towards full awakening, with wisdom ultimately being prioritised over faith.

time in my busy schedule, I read one of the great treatises. Even if I have studied it many times before, new aspects are revealed with each reading.[67] [68]

Reflection. Having studied, we must think about what we learned. This involves investigation and critical analysis to ascertain the correct meaning, which engenders deep conviction in the veracity of the Dharma. Reflection may be done quietly on our own or together with others, discussing and/or debating the teachings. For this reason, Tibetan monastics engage in rigorous debates that are often entertaining as well as educational. Sometimes we believe we understand a topic well but discover we don't because when someone asks us a question or challenges our assertion, we don't know how to respond! The *Sūtra Unraveling the Thought* explains four principles that are useful to understand a phenomenon such as the mind from different perspectives.

The *principle of nature or reality* includes examining realities commonly known in the world, such as water's wetness; inconceivable realities, such as the Buddha's abilities; and the abiding reality (emptiness). To understand the mind, we examine its clear and cognisant nature and its impermanent nature. And that two contradictory emotions or thoughts (eg, anger and love) cannot be manifest simultaneously.

Investigating the *principle of dependence* entails examining causality, the arising of results from their causes. This enables us to understand that because individual phenomena do not have certain qualities or abilities from their own side, when they interact with other phenomena, new properties emerge. WRT the mind, afflictions depend on ignorance; they cease when ignorance ceases. Virtuous mental factors are not rooted in ignorance and do not cease when ignorance ceases. They depend on other causes that can be cultivated limitlessly.

Some results are material and others are consciousnesses or abstract composites; impermanent phenomena that are neither material nor consciousness, ie the person and karmic seeds. Diversity of results is due to diversity of causes. There are two types of causal processes. One involves karma (sentient beings' experience of happiness and suffering depending on their intentions); the other is causality that is distinct from karma (physical, chemical, and biological laws of nature).

The *principle of function* shows that each phenomenon has its own function. Understanding the mind's function, we see that wisdom eradicates ignorance and afflictions. Contemplating the kindness of others as well as their suffering stimulates compassion. Afflictions disturb the mind, and wisdom pacifies and calms it. Agent, object, and action function together within any event.

The *principle of evidence or logical reasoning* involves examining whether something can be understood by any of the three reliable cognizers.[69] By understanding the first three principles, we can apply reasoning, e.g., because x exists, y must exist or occur. We can establish a conclusion that cannot be contradicted by any of the three reliable cognizers. Therefore, based on understanding the above three

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[67] Something to keep in mind when studying the Dharma is that many words have multiple meanings that differ according to the context. The Tibetan word *rig pa*, for example, is translated as "awareness" or "cognisance" in the context of the Mind and Awareness teachings, but in **Dzogchen** it refers to the subtle mind. Bliss has different meanings in the contexts of serenity meditation and highest yoga tantra.

[68] **Dzogchen** is a practice that focuses on recognising the true nature of mind and phenomena, emphasising the direct experience of one's inherent wisdom and clarity. It involves teachings on the natural state of mind, the view of non-duality, and the practice of meditation to realise one's primordial nature beyond conceptual elaborations.

[69] **Three reliable cognizers** are direct perceivers (eg, reliable sense consciousnesses); inferential consciousnesses that use reasoning to know their object; and reliable authoritative testimony of experts.

principles with respect to the mind, we can conclude that liberation is possible and that a path exists that can bring it about.

These four principles are built one on top of the other. We can use evidence and reasoning to cultivate understanding because they presuppose that phenomena have particular functions. We can understand their functions because underlying them are dependently related phenomena. Why is there a relationship between cause and effect? Because it is the nature of effects to follow their causes; this is the way things are. When we ask why matter has the property of obstructiveness and consciousness has the aspect of subjective experience, the only answer is "that is its nature."

To explain these four in their forward sequence: the principle of nature allows for dependent relationships to occur, and dependent relationships between phenomena provide the basis for the specific function of each phenomenon. Based on the dependent nature of phenomena and their functions, we can employ the principle of reasoning to understand things that are not immediately evident. "Because there is smoke, there is fire" involves knowing that the nature of fire is hot and burning, fire produces smoke and smoke functions as evidence of fire.

We apply these same four principles when practicing the four establishments of mindfulness.[70] Many of the meditations on the body, feelings, mind, and phenomena involve understanding their nature, causes and functions or effects. Through that, we can use them as reasons to know that the body, feelings, mind, and phenomena are impermanent, duḥkha by nature, empty, and selfless.

Meditation. Our meditation will be effective when based on learning and critical reflection on the teachings. The purpose of meditation is to integrate the meaning of the teachings into our mindstream by means of repeated practice. Having a correct and stable intellectual understanding due to applying the four principles, we engage in absorption meditation to familiarise our mind with the topic and transform intellectual understanding into realisation. Our meditation mainly (but not exclusively), involves stabilising meditation done with access or full concentration,[71] although analytical meditation may be applied at times. This produces understanding arising from meditation, which has a powerful ability to transform our minds.

Learning, critical reflection and meditation complement each other. The Kadam geshes, who practiced both sūtra and tantra, used to say, "When I hear teachings,

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[70] The "**Four Establishments of Mindfulness**" (also the "Four Foundations of Mindfulness") are part of the core teachings attributed to the Buddha. They are designed to develop mindfulness and awareness.

1. **Mindfulness of the Body**: This practice involves paying close attention to the body and its activities, such as breathing, postures, and movements. Meditation on the impermanence of the body, contemplation of the 32 parts of the body and mindfulness of death are some examples of practices within this category. This mindfulness helps overcome attachment and aversion related to bodily form.
2. **Mindfulness of Feelings**: This refers to being aware of feelings or sensations as they arise, whether they are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. The practitioner learns to observe these feelings without attachment, understanding their transient nature, which helps in reducing craving and aversion.
3. **Mindfulness of Mind**: This involves observing the mind itself, recognising its various states, ie desire, aversion, delusion, concentration, distraction, etc. By being mindful of the mind's nature and tendencies, one learns to cultivate wholesome states of mind and overcome unwholesome ones.
4. **Mindfulness of Dharma**: This is the mindfulness of dharma, which can refer to mental objects, phenomena, or the teachings of the Buddha. It involves understanding the nature of reality as taught in Buddhist doctrine, including the understanding of the Five Hindrances, the Six Sense Bases, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, and the Four Noble Truths. This practice leads to insight into the true nature of phenomena, fostering wisdom and liberation.

These practices are integrated into the path of meditation as essential for developing concentration, insight, and ultimately achieving the ultimate goal of liberation. They are foundational to the practice of vipassana (insight meditation).

[71] **Access concentration** is the level of concentration attained with serenity; **full concentration** is deeper.

I also reflect and meditate. When I reflect, I also hear and meditate. When I meditate, I hear and critically reflect."

Learning gives us general knowledge of the topic and reduces one level of confusion and doubt. Thinking about and analysing teachings gives us a more nuanced conceptual understanding based on reason. Meditating integrates this understanding into our very being. In the case of realising the nature of reality, hearing and studying teachings give us general knowledge about the object of negation, rational arguments proving that all phenomena lack inherent existence and the stages of realising emptiness. By contemplating and discussing what we've studied, we come to understand that the I does not exist inherently as it appears but exists dependently. The I is empty of inherent existence because it is dependent on the five psychophysical aggregates[72] and on the mind designating "I." The emptiness that we have ascertained by reflection now becomes the object of meditation. In meditation we cultivate a union of serenity and insight on emptiness.

REFLECTION

1. Why are study, critical examination, and meditation important to gain realisations?
2. Pick a particular thing and contemplate the four principles—nature, dependence, function and evidence or reasoning—in relation to it.
3. See how the four work together to bring understanding.

Memorisation and Debate

In traditional Tibetan monastic universities, the daily schedule includes specified times for group chanting, teachings, memorisation and debate. Private study and silent meditation are done at monastics' own convenience. Since the time of the Buddha, memorisation has been a principal way of preserving and conveying the teachings from spiritual mentor to disciple. Memorisation has many benefits: students already have some familiarity with a text's contents when they receive teachings on it. After studying a text, they will be able to easily recall its key points. By having quick access to quotations, students can draw attention to these passages when they debate and contemplate. When teaching, they are able to cite passages related to a specific topic from diverse texts, enhancing the breadth and depth of their explanation. In difficult situations, they can easily remember Dharma advice.

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[72] The "Five Psychophysical Aggregates" ("Five Aggregates") are 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, which lead to the perception of a self or ego. Understanding and contemplating the nature of the aggregates is essential for developing insight into the nature of reality.

1. **Form or Matter**: This aggregate represents the physical aspect of existence, including the body and physical sensations. It encompasses the five physical sense organs and their corresponding objects in the external world. This is the material form subject to decay and death, highlighting the impermanent nature of physical existence.
2. **Sensation or Feeling**: This aggregate refers to the sensory experiences of pleasure, pain, and neither-pleasure-nor-pain that arise from contact between the sense organs and their objects. This is the immediate emotional response to sensory input, which can lead to craving and aversion if not understood and managed properly.
3. **Perception**: This is the cognitive aspect of experience, involving the recognition and labelling of objects in the world through the senses. Perception is responsible for distinguishing between different experiences, such as colours, shapes and sounds, allowing beings to navigate their environment.
4. **Mental Formations**: This aggregate encompasses all types of mental habits, discrimination, 'free will' and intentions. It includes the vast array of mental factors other than feeling and perception, such as desire, aversion, determination, confidence, concentration, and mindfulness. These are the driving force behind actions (karma) and are shaped by past actions and conditioning.
5. **Consciousness**: This is the aggregate of consciousness or awareness that arises through the interaction of the other aggregates. It is the aspect of experience that knows or cognises and is divided into six types based on the six sense bases (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind). Consciousness is what experiences the world and the internal realm of thoughts, emotions, and mental objects.

The Five Aggregates are not separate entities but interdependent aspects of a single process that constitutes the individual's experiential world. Understanding and seeing through the illusion of a permanent self amidst these aggregates is a key insight.

Many Tibetan monastics who were imprisoned by the Communist Chinese after 1959 silently recited texts in their prison cells. They spent their time familiarising themselves with the Buddha's thought, and could easily recall advice on how to practice during difficult times. Someone who holds a wealth of texts in their memory is like a cook who has all the ingredients for a delicious meal at her fingertips.

Memorisation is also a way of training the mind. Students must learn to concentrate on the material they are memorising and recall it instantly. In a Tibetan monastery, this requires special focus, since they are surrounded by many other monks loudly reciting passages they are memorising. They build up the ability to not be distracted by external sounds, which is a great aid when they meditate.

Debate is an animated process that helps students to learn the material, think about it and remember what they have learned. The structure of a debate is formalised and both participants (the seated respondent and the standing questioner) must be familiar with the syllogistic structure. This format teaches people how to think clearly. The speaker cannot ramble and hope the debate partner understands what he is trying to say. Both parties must be concise and to the point.

A debate begins with the questioner asking the respondent a question. Once the questioner has an idea of the view the responder holds (the thesis), he will ask what reasons he has to support that. If he sees a flaw in the responder's logic, he will try to refute it either by getting the responder to contradict himself or by establishing the correct view.

In his Supplement to the Middle Way, Candrakīrti states that the purpose of these philosophical debates is not to generate hostility toward the other person and his view or to arrogantly establish our own view in order to gain a good reputation. The purpose is to eradicate the ignorance that obscures both parties from gaining Dharma realisations, and to establish both self and others on the path to awakening. This helps debaters maintain a good motivation and counteracts the supposition that debate is just intellectual competition.

We must be careful to maintain a wholesome motivation so that our Dharma debates and discussions do not become a purely intellectual and ego-driven pursuit.

Āryadeva says:

> While attached to your own position
> and disliking others' positions,
> you will not approach nirvāṇa.
> Neither conduct will bring peace.

Someone who is not really interested in Dharma practice may use debate to enhance his arrogance and animosity.

There are those like the respected master Dondrup Tsondru, well-known for his skill in debate, which made his students proud to have him as their teacher. Once a Mongolian monk, a learned new geshe, was debating at the Great Prayer Festival, and Dondrup Tsondru was the questioner. During the debate, nothing remarkable happened; there was no rigorous exchange on any important issue. Afterward his students asked Dondrup Tsondru, "What happened, Master? You weren't successful in bringing about a powerful debate with this responder." Dondrup Tsondru replied, "The responder was very skilled and learned. Whatever he said accorded with reasoning and scripture, so there was nothing to debate." The Mongolian monk had used debate in the way it was intended—to eliminate ignorance. Dondrup Tsondru honoured that and did not try to stir up false debates just to demonstrate his skill and emerge victorious.

New students learning to debate have a saying, "If you can convince the responder that something that is correct is incorrect or that something that is incorrect is correct, then you are learned and skilled in the topic." Candrakīrti discourages this attitude, saying that it is wrong to refute someone's idea simply for the sake of refuting it and being triumphant. Having the reputation of being a good debater does not get one closer to awakening. In the tradition of Nālandā's learned practitioners, we should be objective, honest, and truthful. A physicist told me that a scientist must be impartial and objective when doing research. Being attached to one's hypothesis or the outcomes of one's research is not the correct approach.[73]

A Western professor once commented to me that monastics debate, but in the end they return to scriptural quotations to "prove" their point. He is right. I have suggested many times that people only use reason when debating topics that are slightly obscure. Scriptural authority should only be used concerning very obscure phenomena, and even then, you must show why the scripture you are citing is reliable. In short, we should try to practice wisely.

To investigate the Buddha's teachings in a beneficial way, it is essential to have the qualities of a receptive student—eagerness to learn, intelligence, open-mindedness and sincerity. As we increase these qualities, our understanding of the Dharma deepens and that arouses confidence in the teachings. This conviction in the truth of the Dharma leads us to have faith in the Buddha who taught it and the Saṅgha who have correctly realised it. This illustrates the interconnectedness of philosophical studies and faith in the Three Jewels.

Role Models

It is my sincere wish that people emulate the great learned practitioners of the past and develop all three wisdoms of study, reflection, and meditation. We should evaluate our own activities and examine whether we incorporate all three into our practice in a balanced way.

When engaging in a new activity, we naturally look to role models for guidance and inspiration. Spiritual practice is no exception. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the two types of prominent role models we find are the scholar/commentator (such as Asaṅga and Candrakīrti) and the ascetic meditator (such as Saraha or Milarepa). Occasionally we find examples of people who are both, such as Nāropa, Dza Patrul Rinpoche, or Tsongkhapa. Because they are usually depicted in one role or the other, we forget that most of great scholars were also great yogis, and great meditators often became so after years of study and debate in this or previous lives.

Hearing about these historical figures, we may receive the unspoken message that to be successful in the Dharma, we have to be a great scholar or a great meditator. Not true. Each of us wants to feel that we are successful in our own way.

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[73] I have witnessed the tendency for some people—teachers and students—to get so accustomed to debating that the way they engage with the Dharma becomes unbalanced. For example, Candrakīrti's *Supplement to the Middle Way* is a key text studied in the monastic curriculum. The initial praise to compassion and the first five chapters are filled with material for practice—compassion, bodhicitta, generosity, ethical conduct, fortitude, joyous effort, and meditative stability. But since there is not much material for debate in these, some people hurry through them to reach chapter 6, which is about emptiness, where they jump into debate with full force. I don't know if they meditate on chapter 6 while studying it. Just learning the terms (object of negation, emptiness of inherent existence, two truths, and so forth) doesn't bring realisations. We need to identify the object of negation within ourselves and then see that it doesn't exist.

Something similar may happen when people study Nāgārjuna's Treatise on the Middle Way. They spend more time on the first few chapters where there is a lot to debate, but neglect chapters 18 and 26, which speak about dependent arising and the means to achieve liberation. I like to teach chapters 18, 24, and 26 of this text because understanding how we are reborn in cyclic existence and how to reverse that and attain liberation are essential topics for practice.

We must remember that success in Dharma practice is not dependent on societal recognition. The law of karma and its effects is not duped by hypocrisy. Leaving this life with a great collection of merit, fewer negativities and the imprints from having heard and practiced many teachings are signs of a successful Dharma practice. Fame is not.

The Buddha engaged in so many diverse activities that he can serve as a role model for many different kinds of people with diverse interests. We can let go of the critical self-judgment that may arise if we aren't among the best debaters or most realised yogis. It's important for each of us to find our own way of living a Dharma life while internally cultivating the qualities of wisdom, bodhicitta, etc.[74] [75]

As Buddhists, we should encourage those who want to live as renounced meditators after completing their studies. We should also support those whose talents lie in study and teaching, compassionate service or social engagement. Each of us must find a suitable way to combine study, meditation and service in our own lives.

It is better to practice as the mind-training teachings advise: externally appearing simple; internally living with love, compassion and bodhicitta.

Dharma practitioners have a variety of personalities. In the early sūtras, we meet Mahākāśyapa, who engaged in ascetic practices allowed by the Buddha. He appears austere, aloof, and perhaps a bit rigid as well. Ānanda, the Buddha's personal attendant, is sociable and kind, compassionately looks after others. Looking at a wide variety of role models widens our perspective.

Bodhisattvas are depicted in several ways in scriptures. Some live in society, helping those they encounter. Some are royalty who affect the welfare of others through fair policies and sharing their wealth. Some are merchants who support the saṅgha and give generously to those in need. Some live with the most neglected people in society, uplifting them materially and with the Dharma. Some live in pure lands, where they make elaborate offerings and learn from the principal Buddha there. Some bodhisattvas teach the Dharma to multitudes; others teach to a few through their example. All these ways of living bodhicitta apply now as well.

Do not become rigid in your notion of a successful Dharma life. Know that, due to karma, people have different mentalities and interests and different opportunities as well. Encourage yourself and others to abandon negativity, create virtue and cultivate wisdom and compassion. Respect all practitioners and rejoice at whatever virtue anyone creates.

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[74] In seeking out role models, I (Chodron) look to the Buddha himself. In sūtra passages and in artwork, he is depicted in a variety of situations: sitting and meditating peacefully; speaking fearlessly to a crowd of non-Buddhists; tending to the needs of a sick monk; talking to merchants, courtesans, royalty and paupers. He addresses one person gently and scolds a monk with wrong views. He instructs that the food remaining from a meal for the saṅgha be given to the poor. He praises the merit of a beggar who mentally offered the meal with a good motivation over the wealthy patron who actually gave the food but lacked a generous intention. He consoles a woman whose child died and those fearing the loss of their parents. The Buddha sits under forest trees; he walks in towns. He spends time with others and is often alone. He speaks with men and women, monastics and lay. He knows how to address intellectuals, wandering ascetics, nonbelievers, the grieving, the impoverished and criminals—the Buddha is everyone's person. He fits no stereotype.

[75] It is important for Buddhists to engage in social welfare projects. For some people that is the natural expression of their Dharma practice. Master Cheng Yen, the Chinese bhikṣuṇī who founded the Tzu Chi Foundation, is a good example of this. A Buddhist nun, she practiced in a hut in Taiwan for years, bowing to each syllable of the Lotus Sūtra. Villagers recall unusual light emanating from her hut. Later she saw a poor person being turned away from a medical clinic, and she began to construct hospitals for the impoverished. Now she directs an international welfare organisation whose volunteers travel around the globe to offer aid when disasters and emergencies occur. Master Cheng Yen remains humble and peaceful in demeanour, yet her firm determination to benefit others has inspired thousands.