

Faith and Devotion to the Spiritual Teacher.

In the *Sutra of the Triple Gem*, we read: “Faith is like a mother that generates and protects all qualities.” If, before we carry out a positive action there is joy in our minds, that is, if we are glad to carry out such an action, then this joy can be called faith. Faith is referred to as the mother, the foundation, the seed, and the root of all qualities. An increase or decrease in the number of what are called the “white dharmas” —virtuous actions—is largely dependent on faith or trust.

We can take into consideration three kinds of faith: *aspiring faith*, *faith of clarity*, and *faith of conviction*.

Aspiring faith is related to the recognition of true sufferings and their true origins. By observing the true sufferings of sentient beings, we see that they are all subject to rebirths and to the problems of such rebirths. We then establish that by way of true paths we can obtain true cessations, or total extinction, of such adversities; consequently, we attain the complete extinction of true sufferings and their origins. What, then, is aspiring faith? It is the faith that desires to remove sufferings and their origins, to obtain their cessation through the practice of paths. Anything we do, any action we carry out, should be accompanied by such faith.

The meaning of the *faith of clarity* concerns the kind of trust that arises through recognizing the qualities of an object such as the Three Jewels, the law of cause and effect, the existence of past and future lives, and so forth.

If we listen to the Buddha’s teachings and develop faith in them, we are generating the third type of faith, the *faith of conviction*. When we carry out a negative action, such as killing a being, we obtain suffering as a result. This shows that such an action generates problems and suffering for others as well as for ourselves. Abstaining from such an action, however, leads to happiness for us in the future. If, through believing in this teaching and in our teacher’s advice on the subject we refrain from negative actions, then such abstention is induced by the faith of conviction.

THE QUALITIES OF A SPIRITUAL TEACHER

The topic we will discuss here concerns devotion to the spiritual teacher, that is, the correct relationship that should exist between ourselves and the spiritual guide (Skt. *guru*, Tib. *lama*) we have chosen. However, before we choose a teacher, we must know what qualities he should possess to be regarded as such. These particular teachings have been taken from Lama Tsongkhapa’s *Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path* (Tib. *Lam Rim Chen Mo*).

The qualities that signify one as a spiritual teacher are listed in the root texts on moral discipline (Skt. *Vinaya*)—the Buddha’s teachings on morality and discipline for monks and lay people—and in numerous texts of the Great Vehicle (Skt. *Mahayana*) that illustrate the requirements of a lineage master. In many tantras, we also find the general and specific qualifications that a Mahayana teacher should possess. Furthermore, the practice of the *Offering to the Spiritual Master* (Skt. *Guru Puja*, Tib. *Lama Chopa*) contains verses that describe the qualities of a teacher from the points of view of vinaya, sutra, and tantra.

The following are some of the qualities of a spiritual guide as described in the Vinaya: the teacher must be familiar with all the subjects of Buddha’s teachings; must uphold his vows purely; must be consistent in keeping the commitments of moral discipline (especially if he is a monk); must be endowed with great compassion for sentient beings; and must be capable of overcoming all difficulties in teaching Dharma to his disciples.

In the *Ornament for Clear Realizations* (Skt. *Abhisamayalamkara*), it is stated that a spiritual teacher should possess ten qualities:

1. *Morality*. The mind of a Mahayana teacher must be pacified through the correct practice of the vows as laid out in the Vinaya.
2. *A pacified mind*. His mind must be pacified through the practice of calm abiding (Skt. *shamata*, Tib. *shiné*). Without possessing a mind that is placated, tamed, and subdued, he would not be able to help others to calm theirs. This quality is of enormous importance for the benefit of others.

We can compare our unruly mind to a wild horse. To tame a wild horse, we must use reins and a bit. To tame a wild mind, distracted by many mental afflictions, we must use the reins of morality. Pacification means keeping it focused on what needs to be done and on what must be discarded. We obtain pacification through awareness and introspection, two elements that are necessary to discriminate between what is correct and positive and what is incorrect and negative.

3. *Complete pacification*. Complete pacification refers to wisdom. When the mind is appeased through the concentration of calm abiding, one part of it is capable of carrying out an in-depth analysis of the real mode of existence of phenomena. Such capability is called complete pacification, or wisdom.
4. *Scriptural knowledge of Dharma*. A teacher must be able to explain the Buddha’s scriptures and teachings. If he has never read or heard such teachings, if he has never analyzed them and meditated on them, he will be unable to teach effectively.
5. *Attainment of the true meaning of emptiness*, the absence of true existence of phenomena. The spiritual teacher should have obtained the realization of the non-existence of self, that is, the understanding that phenomena lack a self. If he has not attained a direct realization, he should at least have gained a conceptual understanding of the true nature of phenomena, having listened to numerous teachings and studied many texts on the subject.
6. *Superior knowledge*. This quality implies that the spiritual teacher must be superior in knowledge to his disciple. Even if the disciple possesses great knowledge and qualities, the teacher must be superior to him in both so that the disciple can rightfully choose his guide. If he is in any way inferior, then he is not suitable for that particular disciple. The text *The Words of Buddha* (Skt. *Udanavarga*) states that if we find an inferior

teacher, our knowledge will diminish; if we find one of equal qualities, our knowledge will remain unchanged; and if we find one who is superior, then our knowledge and qualities will increase.

7. *Skilled in teaching.* He must be acquainted with the method most suited to a particular teaching. Whatever topic he is presenting to a disciple, he must be capable of making it fully understandable.
8. *Love.* This implies that, when teaching, he must be free from all non-virtuous motivations, such as wanting to obtain fame or offerings. The motivation that supports his teachings should be love and compassion for his disciples.
9. *Joyous effort.* He must joyfully commit himself to benefiting others.
10. *Freedom from discouragement and fatigue.* If he were called to go over the same teaching many times, he should not feel fatigued or discouraged.

Of these qualities, the first five are the most relevant. They are considered fundamental qualities of a spiritual guide.

To summarize, a qualified teacher must be familiar with the three kinds of teachings of the Buddha: those concerning morality, concentration, and wisdom. Furthermore, he must know the reality of the non-existence of a self of phenomena and must possess compassion and love.

Again in the *Ornament for Clear Realizations*, it is stated that if we want to attain liberation, or nirvana—the cessation of all suffering—we need to turn to a qualified spiritual guide so that we can begin to follow an inner path.

How can we find our spiritual guide? We need to closely examine various teachers. If we find one who possesses these ten characteristics, then we can choose him as our guide. In many sutras and teachings of the Buddha, however, we read that we live in a degenerate era and that this degeneration is increasing. In such times it is particularly difficult to find someone who meets all of the above criteria. Thus it is advised that when someone is seriously searching for a teacher, the person being considered should have at least three of the ten qualities. It is written that he must at least possess pure faith in the Three Jewels and an inclination to repay other peoples' kindness.

The desire to repay others for their kindness presumes an understanding that all living beings are very kind, in every case and from many points of view; for this reason we feel the desire to repay them. If we stop for a moment and think about the human beings that live on Earth, we can see that they all are very kind to us simply because we depend on them. Thanks to the farmers that cultivate the land, we have our food; thanks to workers engaged in manufacturing clothes, we can clothe ourselves, and so on. Even animals are very kind to us. A chicken, for example, lays eggs that we can eat and provides us with meat and down. Similarly, sheep provide us with milk, meat, and wool. If we turn our attention to this existence, we can easily realize that many sentient beings are kind and generous to us—it is thus crucial that we develop an inclination to repay others for their kindness.

THE QUALITIES OF A DISCIPLE

A disciple, in order to be qualified as such and to be suitable for guidance from a teacher, must also possess certain qualities. The ancient Indian scholar Aryadeva, in his text *The 400 Stanzas*, states that a disciple must first and foremost be honest, capable enough to comprehend the teachings, and interested in what is being taught. A commentary to Aryadeva's text lists 82 qualities that a disciple must possess. Among these we find respect for the teacher and for the teachings and an inclination to carefully follow them. We can sum these up by saying that a disciple must have at least four basic attributes: cherishing interest for the teachings, listening to the teachings attentively, respecting the teacher and the teachings, and possessing the power of intelligence, that is, being able to discriminate between what is negative and what is positive. These are the four conditions conducive to listening.

The disciple must also be tolerant towards unfavorable conditions and towards the principles of different schools of thought, religions, and spiritual paths. In other words, he must not look down upon ideas, philosophies, and methods that differ from his own. There is a saying in Tibet stating that if both the teacher and his disciple possess all the qualities, that is, both are fully qualified, then we have all the conditions necessary for the "hand-crafting of a buddha," meaning that one is highly likely to attain the Buddha state.

A buddha cannot remove the negativities that afflict sentient beings by cleansing them superficially, as when we wash dirty clothes. He is also unable to remove their suffering with the ease with which we remove a thorn from our foot, nor can he pass on his realizations, as when we donate food to the hungry. The only way in which a buddha can help us is by showing us the truth, by presenting us with the teachings. The master who gives teachings on the truth, who presents an inner path, must himself have comprehended such a truth, just as those who listen must be capable of understanding it.

Just as it is difficult to find qualified teachers in these degenerate times, it is equally difficult to find disciples who possess the necessary prerequisites. In any case, a disciple must possess at least two characteristics: impartiality and interest.

One sutra lists the following nine attitudes that a disciple must possess in order to build a correct relationship with his teacher:

1. *Be a good child.* The disciple must act like a good child who always obeys his father's advice and never does anything to displease him.
2. *Possess a vajra mind.* The devotion of a disciple must be firm and solid like a vajra (diamond) and not sway under the influence of external factors such as the opinions of friends, parents, or relatives.
3. *Have a mind like fertile land.* The disciple must be able to carry out the tasks that his spiritual guide has given him. Just as it is possible to sow different crops on fertile land, it being a valid support for their growth, similarly we, through our devotion and correct relationship with the teacher, should endure any difficulties in order to carry out his requests.
4. *Possess an attitude like a wall of mountains.* This definition is taken from Buddhist cosmology. In this explanation, we find a very high mountain—Mount Sumeru or Meru—at the world's center. Around it there are other mountains, which form a

- protective ring. The disciple should be firm in overcoming difficulties, like a mountain that is unshaken even by the biggest boulders and the heaviest masses.
5. *Possess the attitude of a servant.* The disciple must listen to everything that his spiritual guide requests and carry it out—he must be humble and obedient, like a servant.
 6. *Have the humility and dignity of a newlywed bride.*
 7. *Have an attitude like a vehicle.* The disciple must be capable of reaching his goals, in the sense that he must be able to carry out whatever his teacher requests and advises, as in the case of Milarepa with his teacher, Marpa, or Naropa with his teacher, Tilopa. Milarepa had to overcome many difficulties to fulfill what Marpa requested; he did this in order not to disrupt the good relationship with him and to avoid any setbacks in his spiritual growth.
 8. *Possess the attitude of a dog.* A dog will always follow his owner, even he gets beaten or mistreated. In the same way the disciple must not flee from a teacher that treats him harshly, but must keep on following his guidance.
 9. *Be like a boat.* A boat can be steered up or down a river. In the same way, the disciple must be capable of making headway forward, backward, or in any direction with the aim of following the advice of his guide.

These are the nine attitudes that a disciple should have towards his teacher.

DEVELOPING FAITH

Our relations with others are strongly dependent on the way we regard them. If we consider them from the point of view of their qualities, then we will be inclined to relate positively with them. If, on the other hand, we concentrate on their faults, then we will tend to relate to them in a negative way. It is very important that we look upon our spiritual guide exclusively from the point of view of his qualities since, if we look for faults, we might see only those and nothing else. Even if the Buddha was faultless, those who looked for faults in him did so with a flawed mind and thus eventually found them. Therefore, whether we find faults or merits, whether what we see is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, all depends on the way we look at things. How we judge something is entirely up to us. If we want to find qualities, then we will find them. For example, even if a person is not particularly attractive, due to our attachment we see that person as beautiful and attractive; we might even think there is no one more beautiful than him or her. Because our relations with others are largely dependent upon the way we look at them, we should consider our friends, relatives, and acquaintances from the point of view of their merits. From the point of view of Dharma, it is also suggested that we train our minds in the practice of *pure appearance*.

Earlier, we discussed nine attitudes necessary for a good relationship with our teacher. Even if we are unable to develop them all, to possess and to foster just one can be of great help in creating harmony and a good relationship, not only with our teacher, but with all,

since we can develop such attitudes towards our friends and family as well. Once we have found a qualified spiritual guide, we must turn to him with an attitude of pure faith—this should be the root of all our behavior. If we develop faith and trust in our teacher, he will lead us to develop many internal qualities.

FAITH, KARMA, AND SUFFERING

We previously stated that faith is like a mother. A mother is a being who has borne children and strives to protect them from external dangers. Similarly, faith is capable of increasing and improving the white dharmas, or white phenomena—the positive qualities of our mind and actions—and of removing doubt. Once we have eliminated the three poisons—attachment, hatred, and ignorance—we can say that we have realized the Dharma jewel, which is the true refuge.

If we have faith in an object of practice, we will have no uncertainty about it. Through faith, it is possible to accomplish all practices and to attain all realizations, including liberation, or nirvana. Faith is like a boat that we need in order to be able to cross the vast ocean of cyclic existence, or samsara.

Through faith we realize that the causes of suffering are true origins, that is, those phenomena that bring suffering as a result. This recognition gives rise to the faith that aspires to eliminate both suffering and its causes. As a consequence, we develop aspiring faith toward the paths that are antidotes to suffering and to the causes of suffering. With those paths as the basis, we can obtain true cessations. Thanks to faith we can obtain favorable rebirths as human beings or gods. On this foundation, we can even obtain liberation. We speak of this liberation as a city where only happiness and well-being exist.

Faith is sometimes referred to as the purifier of mental filth. Just as we purify dirty water, faith is something that purifies the mind. It is the basis necessary to eliminate pride and to develop respect and devotion toward others.

We can also use other analogies: we can say that faith is like wealth, like a treasure, like the best of foods, something with which we can progress toward and reach nirvana. It is like a pair of legs with which we can walk to nirvana. It is like our hands: with them, we can gather many things whereas without the hands of faith, we are unable to gather virtue. When we realize that the act of killing, for example, will inevitably lead us to experience a result similar to that cause in a future life and we place our trust in the law of cause and effect, thus refraining from committing such an action, this is a practice directly inspired by faith. For this reason, faith behaves like a hand that gathers virtues in our mind. With our hands, we can manufacture objects that we can sell, thus earning money. With clear and unshakable faith in the law of cause and effect, we will refrain from negative actions and gain virtues.

According to the Buddha, those who do not have faith cannot acquire any virtuous actions or karma, that is, white dharmas, in the same way that a burnt seed cannot sprout. It is thus necessary to have faith in the law of cause and effect and in the reality of the four noble truths and to have respect for the Three Jewels. If, in relation to these three objects,

we possess the three types of faith— aspiring faith, clear faith, and faith of conviction— we will attain complete enlightenment.

However, we need to make a clear distinction between blind faith and faith based on reasoning. The three types of faith mentioned above are all based on reasoning. Before we generate faith we need to become acquainted with the qualities of the person or practice in which we want to place our trust. Later, on the basis of understanding their qualities, it is possible to give rise to these three types of faith, which will then be stable and unshakeable. Blind faith, on the other hand, is not a positive quality.

The main disciple of Atisha, Dromtonpa, asked of his teacher, “In Tibet, many people practice meditation, but few obtain any realizations— why is this?” Atisha replied that the realizations of both the Hinayana and Mahayana vehicles, from the highest to the simplest, are generated on the basis of faith in the spiritual teacher. “You Tibetans,” he said, “consider your teacher as an ordinary being but it is impossible to obtain realizations on the basis of such a relationship.” Dromtonpa then asked Atisha to teach on the subject. Atisha replied by saying, “Practice faith!” With these words, he meant to say that faith is fundamental and he was making specific reference to the three types of faith described earlier. He meant that we need to develop aspiring faith in the four noble truths, clear faith in the Three Jewels, and convinced faith in the law of cause and effect. He who has faith, whenever he sees a statue of the Buddha or simply hears the Buddha’s name mentioned, will experience great joy.

If we have carried out a particular action, it will lead to a specific result that will not just fade away— we will definitely experience the result. If we plant a seed in a field, as long as no external factors damage it, it will sooner or later bear fruit. According to the law of cause and effect, karma is definite and will increase. Thus if we have not carried out a particular action, we will not have to experience its results.

When we run into problems and difficulties, we blame someone else for them because we have not fully comprehended the law of cause and effect. If we look closely, however, we will see that every one of our problems derives from a negative cause that we planted ourselves. This is analogous to national laws, whereby if someone kills another person, he or she will be sentenced to death or life imprisonment.

Many young people seeking short-term happiness use substances such as heroin. Later on, they may be arrested or may even die. Such events are consequences of the use of drugs. If we take a look around us, we can see that those that carry out many positive and virtuous actions lead quiet and happy lives, while those engaged in negative actions must face many difficulties.

We can extend our comprehension of the law of cause and effect, considering it in terms of time and space and of how it operates in our everyday life, meditating on its significance in relation to our past and present lives. Through this practice, we can gain a clear faith in the law of cause and effect and can be persuaded that happiness derives from positive actions and suffering from negative ones.

Every day, we must face up to many problems and difficulties. What are these problems? The Buddha taught that these are true sufferings. The basic sufferings of human beings are inevitable and are well-known to us: the sufferings of birth, sickness, aging, and death. We further undergo other kinds of suffering, such as separation from our loved

ones and having to encounter people we dislike. Furthermore, in this day and age we experience many difficulties just to get by—many young people struggle to find good jobs but do not find them, despite their effort. It can also happen that once one finds work, the person is unable to keep the job because of a lack of skill; thus life once again becomes a struggle.

We also experience the suffering linked to dissatisfaction and uncertainty. A clear example of dissatisfaction is the following: if we have money, we want more. If we possess a car, we want another one. These desires are ever increasing. Uncertainty in cyclic existence concerns the relationships and positions of people—someone who is a close friend today may become an enemy tomorrow; someone who is wealthy could be poor next year. There is the uncertainty of fluctuation between high and low, between favorable and unfavorable situations. People who once ruled nations end up experiencing imprisonment, or even death.

Another suffering is that we must repeatedly abandon our bodies. We can live a long life, perhaps as long as 100 years, but in the end we must inevitably die and leave our body to find a new one. Furthermore, we must experience the suffering of having to take numerous types of rebirths without any choice, due to the power of our actions, or karma, and mental afflictions.

We experience the suffering of loneliness, of finding ourselves without friends. Even if in our current life we have many friends and relatives and great wealth, when the time of our death comes we will be completely alone, deprived even of our body. Even those of us who do not believe in future lives subconsciously fear death. This implicitly demonstrates that such people do believe in rebirth—in their mind lies the thought, “I do not want to die.”

Every type of suffering, every type of difficulty that we must face in the course of our lives, has its origin in actions that we ourselves carried out in the past. These actions are based on the three poisons—hatred, ignorance, and attachment—especially ignorance. With this in mind, we can ask ourselves, “Is it possible to eradicate these karmic imprints? Is it possible to eliminate once and for all these causes?” The answer is “Yes! It is possible if we follow a path, a method.” Through a path and a method, we can cease every problem, every suffering and its origin. In this way we can attain everlasting happiness. If we wish to remove a tree that we dislike, it will not be sufficient to chop off the trunk, as we will soon see new saplings sprouting from the stump. We must dig deeply and remove all the roots. Similarly, if we want to eliminate suffering we have to identify its root causes and remove them. We have seen that the principal root is the ignorance that clings to a self—if we do not remove it, we have no possibility of destroying suffering.

The antidote to ignorance is meditation on the absence of self or on emptiness—considering that every type of phenomenon does not exist from its side, by itself. The antidote to attachment is meditation on the unpleasant or repellent aspects of the object of attachment. To weaken anger and hatred, we need to meditate on their antidotes—love, compassion, and patience. If, in our minds, we possess an attitude of loving kindness to others, we long for their happiness. If we possess an attitude of compassion, we desire for all beings to be free from problems and suffering. With these attitudes rooted in our minds, hatred and anger will not be able to rise.

Thus the generation of the intention to abandon suffering and its origins, to attain cessation of suffering and its causes, can be called faith.

A PRACTICE OF TRANSFORMATION

Currently we have a great deal of attachment, hatred, and ignorance. The method of internal practice first teaches us to weaken these mental afflictions, then to render them completely non-existent, transforming them into non-hatred, non-attachment, and non-ignorance.

Mahayana doctrine teaches that we can use mental afflictions and sufferings to proceed on the path. If we know the method, it is possible to make use of any unfavorable circumstance and to transform it into an incentive for our spiritual practice. For example, if we suffer from a headache, we can think that many other beings are, like us, suffering from the same pain. Mindful of this, we can imagine taking on all their pain, even if we imagine that this will increase our suffering. We must be overcome by the desire for all others to be totally free from pain and difficulties and thus wish for such circumstances to ripen upon us.

Wishing that any negative or unfavorable conditions will ripen upon us instead of afflicting others is a Mahayana practice. With such a practice, we can accumulate a great deal of positive energy. Even if we have serious difficulties, if we face them with courage, although we may be unable to resolve or reduce them materially, they will at least be mentally diminished. If we keep on brooding over our problems, becoming obsessed and tormented and thinking again and again, "How can I solve this? How can I overcome that? How can I find a solution to that problem?", we will not be able to free ourselves from these problems. On the contrary, we will generate more mental suffering.

Whenever we encounter people or things towards which we develop feel strong attachment, we can imagine offering them. By giving away something that we are attached to, it becomes a *mandala* offering. We can think that we are offering it to our teacher or to all holy beings—to the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and all realized beings. We imagine that these beings accept our gift and that we therefore cannot feel attachment for it anymore. We can similarly offer all the objects for which we feel hatred or repulsion.

DEVOTION

In order for us to develop pure faith and correct devotion towards our teacher, we must think about the fact that he is very kind to us. We think about his kindness by considering him as being like a doctor, who is capable of curing us of ailments derived from mental afflictions. We can imagine that we are being burned by the fire of attachment, hatred, ignorance, and so forth and that he is like a cloud, laden with rain, that can extinguish this

devastating fire. While we continue to wander in cyclic existence, our guide can help us to get out of it.

Our teacher is even kinder than the buddhas themselves. Since we are still blinded by our mental afflictions, even if a buddha were to appear before us, we would be unable to perceive him; due to our obscurations, we would be unable to build a relationship with a buddha. How, then, can a buddha manifest? He will manifest as our spiritual guide, in an ordinary aspect, with the sole purpose of developing a relationship with us and guiding us. Keeping in mind this particular way in which buddhas manifest themselves and recalling their kindness, we generate pure faith towards our teacher.

We should not consider our teacher in a negative way; we should consider him in a positive way, listening carefully to his teachings and putting them into practice. In this way we will obtain many benefits from this relationship. We will see that our guide is very valuable and that we are capable of enduring and overcoming our suffering, thanks to his kindness towards us. From our spiritual guide we receive spiritual support, just as we have material support from our friends who, for example, may lend us money when we experience financial difficulties.

Once we have understood the great kindness of our teacher, we place ourselves in a correct relationship with him by serving him. The general meaning of this is that we should abandon whatever verbal, physical, or mental actions could upset him and practice any actions that might please him. A practice that is very pleasing to a teacher is to correctly follow his advice and to put into practice what he suggests. If we are unable to carry out what he asks for, we simply tell him this, excusing ourselves for being unable to do it. We can explain to him that what he demands goes beyond our capabilities and ask for permission to act in a different way. In any case, with respect to our own capabilities, we should put as much energy as possible into satisfying his requests, keeping in mind that they are always aimed towards following a virtuous practice and the abandonment of every kind of negativity.

There are many arts and crafts among the various activities of the world. To be able to practice them and attain good results, we have to first turn to an expert in the field, a master craftsman who can teach us the necessary techniques and skills. Only later will we be able to carry out such tasks by ourselves. Similarly, if we want to eliminate our sufferings and problems and thus obtain liberation and enlightenment, we must first turn to a teacher who can teach us the methods for realizing such a goal. Without a good guide, without a valid teacher, there is no way that we can obtain the necessary tools for attaining good results. For this purpose, we must strive to build a good relationship with our spiritual guide, a relationship built on devotion through body, speech, and mind.

To learn more about how to build these relationships, we can read various explanations, such as those in Lama Tsongkhapa's *Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path* (Tib. *Lam Rim Chen Mo*) or Ashvagosa's *Fifty Verses of Guru Devotion*.

Meditation on the Breath

There are numerous examples of meditation on the breath, each of which is useful in transforming our minds and improving our mental attitudes. The following is an example of such a meditation.

While we breathe in through our left nostril, we imagine that a pure, white light enters us. The light penetrates through our psychic channels, filling our body from head to toe and then, together with the air, exits through our right nostril. We can think of this process as the being like the unthreading of the beads of a rosary or like a stream of water that enters through the pipes and exits through the faucet, our nostrils. When the air exits, imagine that it travels out a few inches before re-entering through the left nostril, just like water going into pipes. This process relaxes us completely and puts us at ease. The mind becomes stable and relaxed.

During our meditation, we can generate mindfulness of the breath as the principal object while a section of our mind turns its attention to the body and examines it. We keep our breathing in the background and turn our attention to the object of analysis. The basis of our analytical meditation is now our body and its breathing. We can ask ourselves: “What is breath? Is it one of the five aggregates? Among the five, to which does it belong?”

The air that we breathe belongs to one of the five aggregates: the aggregate of form. The process that takes place is the following: breath induces feelings, the second aggregate, which in turn stimulate discrimination, the third aggregate, which generates compositional factors, the fourth aggregate, which then induce consciousness, the fifth aggregate.

U p t o h e r e

With meditation on the breath, we can experience a feeling that is either pleasant or unpleasant, which brings about discrimination of such a feeling. Such a process can prompt us to engage in an investigation of this kind. We can see that sometimes, while breathing, we experience a pleasant feeling and this, in turn, induces happiness. If we experience an unpleasant feeling, this causes us to be unhappy or uneasy. In the first instance, we develop attachment and experience the desire to cling to such a feeling while we feel aversion toward the unpleasant sensation and wish to remove it.

We can thus meditate on the following: what is pleasant causes attachment, what is unpleasant causes aversion. Sometimes, on the other hand, we experience neither happiness nor discomfort, neither attachment nor aversion—just ignorance. By meditating on and analyzing this object, our breath, we can discern whether a particular experience is positive or not. This is one of many means that can help us understand how breath is included in the five aggregates.

We can also practice an analytical meditation on the twelve sources, six of which are external and six internal. The first six include all that we can perceive, from forms and

sounds to mental phenomena. The six internal sources include the six sense powers, from the eye sense power to the mental power.

We can thus ask ourselves, “Is breathing included in the six external sources or in the internal ones? What type of experience is induced by contact with the breath?” We can come to understand that breath, which is air, is included in the external sources—air is a tangible object source because it can be perceived through the door of our body. How can we experience touch through breathing? Can it be experienced without having come into contact with our sensory powers or must there be contact? Through our body, possessing the sense of touch, our breathing can appear as an experience that is either coarse or soft.

We can also analyze breath from the point of view of the four noble truths. Among the four noble truths, where can we place our body? And our breath? Both belong among true sufferings, and thus breathing is suffering. The breath of an enlightened being, on the other hand, is not considered as true suffering because it does not originate from karma or mental afflictions.

As we analyze further, we can see that our breath is generated from actions, which stem from mental afflictions; these, in turn, are generated by ignorance. We can arrive at an understanding that the fact of taking continuous rebirths in cyclic existence and our ongoing suffering depend on our attitude of clinging to an independent self. With respect to our way of seeing the breath, we must develop a clear mental image of the object of refutation, its inherent existence. We think that breathing exists from its own side, by itself. We are ignorant with respect to its ultimate nature, its actual reality. Breath arises in dependence on other phenomena and necessarily depends on causes and conditions—therefore it cannot exist independently.

We can apply such reasoning to ourselves and thus determine that we too are dependent, we too arise in dependence on causes and conditions. This understanding of dependence and of the lack of existence by nature can be applied to all existing phenomena. By using this method to analyze the existence of persons and things, we can obtain a clear intellectual understanding of this reality through reasoning. Subsequently, when we have become familiar with this process, we can gain an intuitive and direct understanding of emptiness, the actual mode of existence of phenomena.

On the grounds of a direct realization of emptiness, we can completely eradicate cyclic existence, the inborn tendency to cling to our “self,” to true existence. We can thus obtain complete liberation and supreme enlightenment. Once we have completely removed this clinging to an innate self, we can obtain limitless happiness, the only happiness that is actually without limit.