

LIFE IS PRECIOUS

*An unforgettable teaching from
His Holiness the 41st Sakya Trizin
on Life, Dharma and Happiness*

Buddhadharma and The World

Buddha nature is like a seed that we have inside us which, if allowed to grow, will ripen into enlightenment. It has always been inside us but until now, we haven't met with the right conditions for it to grow. Just like a seed needs particular conditions to grow into a plant, our buddha nature needs the right conditions to produce enlightenment.

The world in which we live today is complicated and turbulent, with many people faced with problems like stress, alienation and depression.

If we are to live well in this world, we need to find a way to tackle the problems that afflict it. There are many different systems, philosophies and religions that attempt to solve these problems, and they all share one basic belief: that everyone wishes to be free from suffering and everyone wishes to be happy. It seems to me that the Buddhadharma is a very effective way to attain these goals.

In general, most of our efforts in life are dedicated to the pursuit of happiness. In this endeavour, we have made tremendous progress in the fields of science and technology; and due to this progress, we have been able to solve many issues and greatly benefit mankind.

But although valuable, this material progress cannot bring us true peace and happiness. If we are to find true peace and happiness, it is absolutely essential that we achieve inner spiritual progress. And in order to do so, we need to study religious teachings and put them into action in our daily lives.

The Buddha's teachings are based principally on the fact that every living being, not only human beings, but every living being possesses Buddha Nature. Buddha Nature means that the true nature of our mind is pure, right from the beginning, and has been so since beginningless time. Although it is of itself perfectly unblemished, it is nevertheless covered by obscurations, which prevent us from seeing it. But by practising the spiritual path, we can eliminate these obscurations and discover our mind's true nature. Once we discover our Buddha Nature, we become enlightened, free from suffering and naturally peaceful and happy.

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Although all beings have Buddha Nature, we human beings have the most potential to discover ours. This is because we have the opportunity to encounter and practise the Buddhadharma. And so, human life is very, very precious. And when we have obtained this precious human life, and with it the possibility to become enlightened, it is crucial

that we make optimal use of it. There is no greater loss than that of missing the opportunity for enlightenment that our human life brings us. So the first thing we need to do is to realise how precious human life is. Once we realise this, then we cannot remain without striving to make the best of it.

The second thing we need to do is to ponder upon impermanence and death. The Lord Buddha said that everything that is created by causes and conditions is impermanent. This applies most of all to human life. We have no possibility of knowing how long our life will last. Our only certainty is that one day we will die. In fact, death could occur at any moment. There are many causes that could cut short our life. Just as a breeze can extinguish a lamp in a single moment even though it has enough oil to burn for many more hours, in the same way our lives can suddenly be cut short by unexpected circumstances, even if we are strong and healthy. And so it is very important that we make the most of our life.

Impermanence is actually a very good thing because, if we realise impermanence, we naturally lose our attachment to ordinary things and we enter the spiritual path. Through remembering impermanence, we can be released from all forms of suffering. According to the Buddha's teachings, the main source of our suffering is attachment, especially to the self, and by remembering impermanence we lose this attachment and become free from suffering.

From the moment we are born, we believe that our body and our mind are one, that together they form a self. In fact, when our lifespan is over, our body and our mind become separated. Our body, which we treasured so much, disintegrates and disappears, but our mind continues in another form of life and when it does, nothing of this life follows it. What does follow it is karma, the result of the actions that we have performed in this life, which determines the kind of life form that we will embody in the future.

Our karma follows us like a shadow and defines what life form we are to take. The life that we live now doesn't come out from the void. It is the result of actions that we performed in previous lives. Nothing appears out of empty space. Everything appears as the result of causes and conditions. Each and every experience that we have has its own causes. The causes of what we experience do not come from outside forces, but rather they are the result of our own actions.

This teaching of the Buddha, the law of karma, means that we are the authors of our own reality. And so, if we truly wish to have happiness, and we truly wish to be free from suffering, then we must work on the causes of happiness. Without working on the cause, we cannot expect to produce the result. So what are the causes of happiness?

According to the Buddha's teaching, the main cause of samsara, or the cycle of existence, is not knowing the true nature of the mind and, instead, believing that we are a separate self. The Buddha teaches that there is no such thing as a self, that the self is a mere concept, a construct of the mind. When we cling to the notion of a self, we automatically create the notion of others. And when there is the notion of self and others, there is attachment to one's own side and hatred for the others'. This gives rise to the three root poisons, which are ignorance, desire and hatred. From these three defilements, all the other impurities arise in the mind. As a result of these, we take negative action – physical action, verbal action and mental action. These non-virtuous deeds are what creates all our disturbances and suffering. No outside enemy can create as much disturbance as our own defilements can. So our worst enemy is not outside, our worst enemy is actually within our own mind. Hatred is the worst enemy that anyone can have. It destroys our own peace and happiness as well as that of others.

On the other hand, it is also true that virtuous deeds have karmic results. Virtuous deeds are positive actions that are free from the defilements, such as ignorance, hatred and desire, but rather are performed out of loving kindness and compassion. Everything positive that we experience now is the result of virtuous actions that we performed in previous lives. By the same token, the virtuous actions that we perform now will bring positive results in future lives. Therefore, if we long for happiness, we need to work on the causes of happiness. Virtuous actions are the source of all happiness, and we must make every effort to perform them.

And so, we need to bear in mind how precious our human life is, how fleeting it is, and how important it is to make the best of it by practising the Buddhadharma. The Buddhadharma teaches us that everything that we experience is the karmic result of past actions, and that our current actions will determine our future experience. Therefore, if we want to experience happiness, then we need to perform virtuous actions.

The next thing we need to do is to embark on the true Mahayana path by developing loving kindness and compassion. We all long to receive love and compassion, but

so does every other living being. If we only think of our own happiness, we'll never attain it. It is only by wishing all beings, even our worst enemy, to be happy and free of suffering that we ourselves can attain happiness.

Loving kindness and compassion should not merely be understood intellectually. Rather, by meditating on them, we should develop an inner feeling that our mind is immersed in the nature of loving kindness and compassion. Once we have attained this, there arises what is called the enlightenment thought. Enlightenment thought means the wish to attain perfect enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. This aspect of spiritual practice belongs to the method side of the Dharma path.

The method side is a great help in eliminating our faults, but it is not sufficient. It has to be combined with the wisdom side of Buddhist practice if we want to reach liberation from suffering. Wisdom has two paths: concentration and meditation. With concentration, we bring our mind to a standstill, away from the torrent of thoughts that constantly assails it. Once we have mastered this practice, once our mind is still, then we can start meditating on the ultimate nature of all phenomena.

According to the highest Mahayana philosophy, called the Middle Way, the true nature of all phenomena is away from all description, away from conceptual thought. It is beyond thought. Once we realise it, we eliminate our ignorance, our clinging to this life as real, and we attain enlightenment. Enlightenment is the state of perfect happiness, free from any kind of suffering.

The Buddha's teachings are as relevant today as they were twenty-five hundred years ago. And if we follow them earnestly, we can become free of the problems that so direly affect our society today.

I pray that all beings may swiftly attain enlightenment.