

You Can Move Mountains

An Introduction to the Mind-Science of Dharma

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The Long Road

Walking into just about any bookstore in America today one can find a variety of meditation books touting the personal benefits of meditation: "Meditation for Relaxation," or "How to Solve All Your Weight/Money/Self-Esteem Problems in Three Easy Steps Through Meditation." While numerous scientific studies have shown the health benefits of a daily meditation practice, this is not the purpose of meditation from the perspective of Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha. From the Buddhist point of view, the purpose of meditation is to wake up and become a Buddha for the benefit of all sentient beings. Ultimately, therefore, the true purpose of our existence is to benefit others. In fact, this altruistic, enlightened mind is our true nature. It is simply obscured by delusions that lead us to think that selfishness and self-destructive behavior will bring lasting happiness.

However, even these powerful delusions can't hold compassion at bay. In January of 2003, I attended a peace rally in Washington D. C. to protest the as yet unexecuted war on Iraq. Very few of the dozens of people I spoke with at the rally were focused on the repercussions of the war for themselves personally. The refrain repeated over and over again was, "What about the Iraqi people? What about all the innocent people who will be harmed by this?" If we were as narcissistic and self-absorbed as we often chastise ourselves for being as a people, why the outpouring of concern for people we had not met, many of whom may genuinely hate us? I think it is because there is a growing realization that it truly is a small world after all. What affects you affects me, and there are long-term consequences to the potentially shortsighted decisions we make all the time as individuals and as a nation.

But in the face of the great weight of human folly leading us to war, environmental crisis, and economic uncertainty, and the focus on materialism in our culture, not to mention our own personal stress and suffering, what can any of us do?

We can move mountains with a single breath.

Many of you reading this have heard of the quantum physics theory of a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico being caused by a butterfly hovering over a flower in China. Obviously, there are many more causes and conditions that contribute to a hurricane, but a butterfly in China could be one of them. Just the same, if we turn left instead of

right, say yes instead of no, or do any one of a million little things differently throughout our day, our whole world changes.

For example, if you choose a point on the ground and start walking in a straight line for 200 paces, and then start from the same point again and walk 200 paces having turned at the point of origin just one inch to the right, at the end of the walk you will be far to the right of where you stopped the first time. In this same vein, we can dramatically change not only our experience of the world, but also ultimately the experience of all beings that share this world with us, if we begin to make small changes in our own minds. With each breath, we turn a little to the right, a little bit closer to fully embodying the wisdom and compassion that exists within us. That is the purpose of this essay; to explain simple techniques that lead, over time, to radical change. Don't think for a minute that you can't do it. Millions of people throughout history have done so, a little bit at a time. It will take effort, but in time, you will notice a change in the quality of your life and will begin to recognize the dramatic change you can create in the world.

The first section, "Perspective," explains the basic view of Buddhism, to provide some context for the practice of this mind-science. These articles were originally written over the course of several months to give the casual reader an introduction to Dharma. I have expanded upon them and collected them together here for the first time, and have added the section called "Action" on practices to create change. The journey described here is a long one. I hope you find this short booklet useful in taking the first few steps.

Part One: Perspective

The Four Noble Truths

Dharma, as practitioners refer to Buddhism, is a method for reaching enlightenment, rather than a religion in the general Western understanding of that term. Founded over 2,500 years ago in North India by Shakyamuni Buddha. The various forms of Dharma have millions of adherents worldwide.

Suffering, and the possibility of finding release from suffering, are the basis of the entire path of Dharma. People don't like to talk about suffering, though. We don't like to think about the ways in which we cause our own and other's suffering, because that would mean we would have to change our lives. And yet, all any of us wants is to be happy. The first step to finding happiness is to recognize that it is only through investigating suffering that we can understand its causes and thus ultimately its cure. This is what the Buddha taught in the form of the "Four Noble Truths."

The "Four Noble Truths," common to all forms of Buddhism, was the first teaching

given by the historical Buddha at the Deer Park in Sarnath. They are called “Noble” because they are realized truths of the Arhats, or “Noble Ones,” beings that have reached freedom from samsara or the world of suffering. The Four Noble truths are:

1. Existence is Suffering;
2. Suffering is caused by delusion or ignorance;
3. This delusion or ignorance can be dispelled by anyone;
4. This is accomplished through following the Noble Eightfold Path

Essentially, the Buddha taught that we are all mentally ill – delusional – to one degree or another. We run around our whole lives chasing after a career, sex, money, power, and other temporary things in a futile attempt to find lasting happiness. While we may feel fulfilled for a certain amount of time when we achieve some worldly goal, the phenomena of the world are inherently temporary, and thus unable to bring lasting happiness. This is one of the major delusions we cling to which causes our suffering. For example, if you buy a new car, for a while you are happy about it and show it to your friends. You enjoy taking it out for a drive and washing it. After a while, though, it is just a car that needs repairs, gas, insurance and ultimately, complete replacement. You get stressed out about the cost of maintaining, protecting and replacing it. Much like an addict who thinks that just one more hit will make all the pain of life go away, we continually attempt to satiate our desire for happiness with the very sources of suffering. And the tighter we try to hold on to that limited happiness, the more it hurts when the inevitable happens and happiness slips through our fingers. However, it is possible to break free of the cycle of suffering and achieve full, complete enlightenment, even in this very life. Through following the methods taught by the Buddha, we can find the lasting joy and equanimity of Buddhahood – complete enlightenment.

The fourth Noble Truth deals with the Noble Eightfold Path:

1. Right View;
2. Right Thought;
3. Right Speech;
4. Right Action;
5. Right Livelihood;
6. Right Effort;
7. Right Mindfulness;
8. Right Contemplation

Right View, and Right Thought are the sphere of wisdom. Right Speech, Action and Livelihood are the sphere of morality. Right Effort, Mindfulness and Contemplation are the sphere of meditation. Through our lack of wisdom, we simply reinforce our habitual tendency to seek happiness through the causes of suffering. Through developing an understanding of the Dharma, of the nature of suffering, cause and effect (karma), etc...

and then living in and interacting with the world according to that understanding, we begin to break patterns of thought and behavior that bind us to the wheel of rebirth in samsara, the world of suffering. Ultimately, each of these eight areas of the path support one another. When we have Right View, we engage in Right Action, which in turn supports our continued development of Right View. In addition, when we act in a moral or ethical manner, our mind is at ease, which supports our meditation and other efforts on the path.

We are not the victims of circumstance: we create our circumstances. Within each of us lies the power to change our lives, and to positively affect the people around us. Like ripples in a pond, we can change everything and create the world we truly want; a world filled with people who work for peace and the benefit of others.

Karma

Karma is a misunderstood term. It does not mean “comeuppance” as some people use the term. It does not refer to reward and punishment at all. It simply means “action” and refers to the law of cause and effect. The Bible teaches this as well: “As ye sew, so shall ye reap.” If we sew seeds of hatred and anger, that is the world in which we will live. If we sew seeds of loving-kindness and compassion, our world will evolve accordingly. Just as we cannot plant corn and watch beans come up, we cannot act in a hateful or selfish way and expect happiness. In modern, colloquial language, “What goes around comes around,” and that goes for both good and bad behavior.

Another way to look at how karma works is to think of the mind like a car: it will go wherever we steer it. If we point our mind towards hatred, that is what we will experience. If we point it towards compassion, that is where the mind will go. On a simply physical or neurological level, whenever we do something we create new pathways, or reinforce old ones, in the brain. So even if you believe that the mind and brain are the same thing (which Buddhists do not), then you can recognize that training your brain to respond with kindness will have an effect over time, just as indulging afflictive emotions will as well.

This begs the question, “What about when I try to be nice to someone and they’re mean to me in return?” Well, first of all, there are two minds involved here, not just yours. Secondly, your further response to their anger determines your own experience of the situation and your future karma. In addition, everyone’s karma is a mixed bag. If I have sewn the seeds of hatred in the past, I will have to experience their ripening eventually. I have found that it is most productive to view hardship and unkindness on the part of others as an opportunity to purify negative karma. If I respond in kind with hatred myself, I am simply creating more negative karma for the future.

Afflictive Emotions

We have all experienced anger, hatred, desire, jealousy and other such emotions many times throughout our lives. We often feel justified in our anger, for example, saying, "How dare they say that to me!" We spin an excited web in our minds about how stupid and unbelievable this other person is and plan various ways to tell them off or get revenge. However, we rarely stop and notice that our own anger causes us suffering. It doesn't feel good to be angry, yet we do it again and again. In the same vein, hatred, though it may give us some sense of purpose, is also suffering. Whatever we hate we want to destroy, but often cannot. If we try we may create new enemies in the process, or we may not have the means to destroy our enemies and so are consumed by unrequited hatred. Similarly, jealousy makes us feel inadequate and drives us to chase after shallow accomplishments in order to overcome this sense of failure. Desire is trickier. We think desire feels good because we can daydream about getting what we want, but if we can't or don't get it, it is suffering. If we get it, the joy in having it does not last, and we suffer. If we get it and then lose it, we must chase after it again, suffering its loss.

And yet we continue to reinforce our tendency to fall back on such responses to our experience, only leading to more suffering in the future. In the Dharma, we try to undo this process of developing such habits by accustoming our minds to respond with wisdom and compassion.

The first step is to notice when we indulge such afflictive emotions and remember that they are the cause of suffering. We should investigate how they are the cause of suffering. In the case of anger and hatred, for example, we should consider that these emotions are not caused by the actions and words of others, but by our own minds. If someone else had the power to put anger into our minds, they would have the power to do so consistently and to whatever degree they would like. However, we have all had the experience of suddenly not being bothered by some consistent action of another that usually really gets to us, or one day being really bothered by something that we hardly noticed before. This is proof that these emotions are a product of our own minds and not the result of someone else's words or deeds.

In "The Way of the Bodhisattva" by Shantideva, it is written that our worst enemies are in fact our best friends. Our friends tell us what we want to hear, but our enemies teach us that which we still have to learn. Therefore, we should treasure our enemies as our friends and try to cultivate an awareness of their true Buddha-nature. The cultivation of this awareness is the cultivation of compassion and wisdom and will lead us to perfect, complete, precious enlightenment.

The Two Accumulations

Wisdom and merit are the two accumulations necessary for achieving Buddhahood. "Wisdom," in this context, includes compassion. They are inseparable. Wisdom without compassion isn't really wisdom at all. It is selfish and near-sighted, and thus nothing more than cunning or street smarts. Compassion is characterized by a mind that sees the suffering of sentient beings to the extent that one is compelled to act on their behalf. Without wisdom, compassion is at best ineffective, at worst damaging, like a parent who tries to protect their child from the consequences of their drug or alcohol addiction without skillfully addressing the actual addiction itself. Enabling behavior, such as covering for a drug addicted child's missing school rather than getting them the help that they need in order to protect them from any immediate consequences might come from a place of love, but it does nothing to help those who are suffering. Thus, "wisdom" may be thought of as skillful compassion. So in the case of a drug or alcohol addicted child, the truly compassionate thing to do might be an intervention, and getting the child into rehab.

Merit is what we might colloquially call "good karma." Through virtuous thoughts, words and actions, we cultivate the causes for enlightenment. That is, the auspicious circumstances to have a precious human life in which we meet the Dharma and a qualified spiritual master to guide us on the path to enlightenment. In order to have merit in terms of the two accumulations, though, we must remember to dedicate our merit for enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, wishing that our virtuous deeds be a cause for the end of their suffering, or we risk wasting the merit on worldly benefits, such as good food, money, and a comfortable life. Dedicating merit locks it away in a sort of bank account where it will be drawn upon specifically for our enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Functionally, this essentially means that our dedicated merit is "spent" on auspicious circumstances leading to our own awakening, thus enabling us, through our perfected wisdom and compassion, to effectively lead other beings out of delusion and into enlightenment.

One can say the following dedication prayer after any Dharma practice or any other virtuous activity:

"By the virtues collected in the three times by myself and all beings in samsara and nirvana, and by the innate root of virtue, may I and all sentient beings quickly attain perfect, unsurpassed, complete, precious enlightenment."*

This dedication of merit is vital to our awakening, but it is often overlooked. Often in Dharma practice, we focus solely on the "main" meditation, such as shamatha (silent meditation), mantra chanting, and visualization. However, if we don't dedicate the merit of such practices, the virtue accumulated through practice may be wasted on various forms of worldly success and fortune.

To explain the above prayer more fully, "virtue" may be thought of as "good karma," or the causes of what we commonly call good karma. The three times are the past present and future. "Samsara" is the state of being, of ignorance, through which we experience suffering, while "nirvana" is the state of enlightenment. It is not Buddhist heaven. The "innate root of virtue" is our own Buddha-nature, the seed of our enlightenment; our true nature.

We have the power to dedicate some of the merit accumulated by other sentient beings as well because they have all been, at one point or another, our parents. Just as a child can claim some kind of ownership of the home in which they live and the possessions of their parents which they will ultimately inherit, we too can claim some of the merit generated by others. By dedicating it, by wishing that our own merit or good karma be a cause for the enlightenment of ourselves and all sentient beings, we further ourselves and ultimately all sentient beings on the path to Buddhahood. This is possible because, as explained in the section on karma, the mind goes where you point it. So if you point it toward enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, enlightenment is ultimately what you will achieve.

Therefore, in order for any practice to be complete, we must first go for refuge in the Three Jewels of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and then after the main body of the practice, we must dedicate the merit for the benefit of all sentient beings. You can even say this prayer when you first wake up to dedicate any virtuous acts you may have engaged in while dreaming. As all phenomena come from the mind, we accumulate virtue and non-virtue in the dream state as well as the so-called waking state. So in the morning after you wake up, say the dedication prayer above, even if you don't remember your dreams.

*From the "Ratnashri Dharma Chakra Book of Prayers" translated by Khenchen Konchog Gyaltsen Rinpoche.

Part Two: Action

Seeing the Buddha-nature Within All Sentient Beings

If you've ever been stuck in traffic when you're in a hurry, and chances are you probably have been, you know how frustrated you can become. You see people pointlessly leaning on the horn, or out their car windows screaming at people to hurry up when the source of the traffic jam is two miles down the road. What would happen to your own experience of the situation if you took the time to meditate? What if you tried instead to see each person in every car on the road as a being of wisdom and compassion?

In the esoteric tradition of the Dharma, we use visualization to transform our mind's perception. Although we set aside specific time to work on these visualizations, the ultimate goal is to exist in a state of mind characterized by compassion and wisdom all the time. One of the most popular figures for such meditations is Chenrezig, the Lord of Compassion. He is the embodiment of the compassion of the enlightened ones and as an archetype represents the compassionate nature within each of us. In the Dharma, we are taught that our true nature is that of a Buddha, not one of sin and evil. All beings possess this Buddha-nature, and this form of meditation is designed to develop our awareness of it.

In the traditional meditation, we visualize ourselves sitting in full-lotus posture with one face and four arms. The two upper arms are in the "prayer" position at the heart level, holding a wish-fulfilling jewel. The lower right arm holds a crystal mala, or rosary, and the lower left hand holds the stem of a lotus flower that blossoms above our left shoulder. We wear a five-pointed crown, jewels, silken robes, and radiate the light of love and compassion out to all beings, transforming them into manifestations of Chenrezig as well. When one is familiar with the symbolism in these visualizations, generating the visualization is a method for developing the attendant state of mind. For example, the lotus blossom is a metaphor for the state of all beings. While its roots are in the mud, it slowly rises up through clearer and clearer water until it ultimately breaks the surface and blossoms. This is the mind of a sentient being and it's emerging into enlightenment.

However, you can use whatever sort of visualization you like. If you are Christian, you might visualize everyone as Jesus or Mary, for example. Whatever imagery you choose, try to see everyone this way, even the guy screaming curses out of his car window, because this will change your experience of the situation and, over time, will affect the outlook of those around you.

I once had the experience of being yelled at by my boss. I was trying to argue with his complaint about my performance, and that just made him angrier. I looked at him quietly, realized that even in that state he was still, at heart, an enlightened being, and seeing him as Chenrezig, I said I was sorry for whatever frustration I had caused him. His anger immediately subsided and the situation passed. I also had the experience at a grocery store once, after doing a formal session of this meditation, of seeing everyone as Chenrezig. It wasn't entirely a spontaneous experience; that is, I was consciously trying to see everyone in this form, but it seemed to come easier that night for some reason. Everyone I interacted with lit up and smiled, their shoulders relaxed, and they seemed a little less worn out from the day. I didn't do anything to them, or give them anything. They simply responded to my attempt to recognize their own true nature. So whether you are in a traffic jam, a grocery store, an airport waiting area, or being yelled at by someone, you can have an immediate, positive impact on the situation and gradually accustom your mind to this new way of seeing things, one step at a time.

Going for Refuge

In order to benefit from the wisdom of the Dharma and the meditation techniques presented here, you do not need to convert to Buddhism. However, how do you become a Buddhist? We call the conversion ceremony “going for refuge,” or simply the “refuge ceremony.” In the presence of a person qualified to perform the refuge ceremony, you go for refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

A Buddha is a being who is awake, one who sees perfectly clearly all things. In short, a Buddha is omniscient and has no more karma of its own to purify. Such a being is beyond all the distinctions we hold so dear: they are ultimately beyond gender, race, sexuality, and nationality. The sole purpose of a Buddha is to act for the benefit of sentient beings. If such a being exists, you may ask, then why don't they just give us enlightenment? Because a Buddha is not omnipotent, they do not have the power to take away the delusion that exists in our own minds. We have to wake up ourselves. If the Buddhas were capable of giving us enlightenment, then out of their great compassion, they would have done so eons ago. They can, however, help to show us the way. In our era, Shakyamuni Buddha, born in the sixth century B.C.E., turned the wheel of the Dharma in order to lead all sentient beings out of the world of suffering. So it is through his teachings and tireless efforts to lead us to them that we can find enlightenment.

The Dharma is simply the truth. It is reality as it is, without fabrication. It isn't an idea about reality at all. “Change is the way of things; nothing lasts.” This is simply a statement of truth that can be verified through investigation. In fact, the Buddha said not to take anything he said for truth simply because he said it. Instead, we have been instructed to investigate it for ourselves and simply discard what does not bear up to scrutiny. Logic is therefore indispensable as a method for coming to the truth. People new to Tibetan Buddhism are often surprised to find that traditionally many monks study anywhere from nine to twenty years before entering long meditation retreats. There are those, of course who go straight into retreat, and those who neither study extensively nor do long retreat, but many of the great masters studied first to ground their mind in the path before taking the intuitive approach. My own teacher, Khenchen Konchog Gyaltsen Rinpoche, earned the Acharya degree after nine years of study before entering retreat.

The third jewel, “Sangha,” is a term that is often misunderstood simply because it is used in different ways. In the West, sangha is presumed to mean the community of practitioners lay and ordained, at a particular center. Thus, we speak of the Chicago sangha, for example. However, it is more traditionally used to refer to the ordained

community, so at some centers, one might hear that there is a meeting of “sangha,” meaning a meeting of the ordained community. Then there is the meaning of “Sangha” (with a capital “S”) in the refuge ceremony. Here, it means the community of enlightened disciples of the Buddha, those who are also capable of helping us on the path and not Joe who sits next to us at the center for Sunday morning practice.

During the refuge ceremony, one repeats a prayer asking these Three Jewels that one be given refuge from the sufferings of samsara. The teacher also cuts a lock of one’s hair from the top of one’s head and then one receives a new name. The cutting of hair is symbolic of renouncing attachment to worldly things. The teacher may then give one a new name. Monks and nuns generally use their ordination names publicly, the laity generally does not, but there is no hard and fast rule.

It is only after participating in this ceremony that we are considered at least nominal Buddhists. Real conversion to Buddhism, however, takes a long time. It is a process through which we stop going for refuge in all the things of the world, trying to find an end to suffering in “everything beneath the sun” and instead turn to the Three Jewels of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha as the only sources of refuge. Perhaps we could say that we only truly convert when we become enlightened ourselves.

So it goes...one breath at a time.