

How to rely on a spiritual mentor as the root for developing the path - Part 4 of 4

(lightly edited transcript)

by Ven. Thubten Chodron©, at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle, 1991/92.

- How to rely on our teachers with our thoughts:
Developing loving respect for our teachers by remembering their kindness
 - *Their kindness exceeds that of the Buddha*
 - *Their kindness in teaching us the Dharma*
 - *Their kindness in inspiring us*
 - *Their kindness in including us in their circle of students and providing for us materially*
- How to rely on our teacher through our actions:
 - *Offering material*
 - *Paying respect and offering our service and help*
 - *Practicing according to our teachers' instructions*
- Doing analytic meditation on Lamrim topics
- Questions and Answers

How to rely on our teachers with our thoughts:

Developing loving respect for our teachers by remembering their kindness

There're four different points in this. The word "kindness" here refers to the benefit that we received from our teachers. In other words, other beings are kind because we have received benefit from them. They say in the scriptures that our teacher, from their side, may or may not be a fully realized being or Buddha. But from the side of their kindness, in other words, from the side of the benefit we receive from them, they definitely are the Buddha. This is because we didn't have the karma to be alive on this planet when Shakyamuni Buddha was teaching. We didn't have that ability to benefit from Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings. Who knows what we were born as when Shakyamuni Buddha was alive; what realm we were in. But now, we're able to contact the teachings through our spiritual teacher. Our teacher is giving us all the benefit that the Buddha gave to his disciples at the time he was alive. We also talked last week about how the Buddha wouldn't say anything different from what our teacher's saying.

1. Their kindness exceeds that of the Buddha

The first point is "Our teacher's kindness exceeds that of all the Buddhas." We didn't have the karma to be alive at the time of Shakyamuni Buddha. It's our teachers who give us the direct teachings, just as Shakyamuni Buddha did to his disciples, so in that way, our present teachers are kinder than the Buddha. They are the ones who give the teachings to us and enable us to contact the method of thought transformation. Our minds are so obscured that even if Shakyamuni Buddha came here, he wouldn't be able to do much for us because we wouldn't be able to recognize his qualities and recognize him for what he is. So again, just the fact that we have a teacher and we can see good qualities in our teacher, is something that's very beneficial for our own practice. They enable us to learn the teachings and put them into practice.

2. Their kindness in teaching us the Dharma

Our teachers haven't made us go through all sorts of hardship in order to receive the teachings. We just get in our car and drive over here, sit in comfy chairs with soft carpet, listen to the teachings, and that's it. When you hear the stories of some of the past lineage teachers and what they had to go through to get teachings, we would probably run away if we were put through the same. There is Milarepa, this great Tibetan sage, who realized that his mind was overwhelmed by negativities and obscurations. He wanted a method of purification. He went to his teacher Marpa whom he had checked out and recognized as a highly realized being, and asked for teachings. But Marpa just kept kicking him out. Every time Milarepa came in, Marpa would swear at him and kick him out! Now imagine if you went to New York for Kalachakra and His Holiness swore at you and kicked you out. You wouldn't come back and ask for more because of devotion! You see the difference in the level of the mind?

Our teachers are very kind to us. They don't put us through the ego torture that Marpa put Milarepa through. Milarepa was quite an exceptional student and had the strength of character to know what he was doing and kept coming back. But our teachers are quite kind in making things very easy for us.

Nowadays, there are books, there are tapes, there is everything! In the olden days, in Tibet, you made every effort to get to the teachings because if you missed them, there weren't tapes to listen to afterwards. There wasn't a book to read afterwards. You had to make the effort.

You can see this even in Dharamsala, when we go for teachings by His Holiness. The temple is too small for all the visitors. Some people sit inside, but most of the people are sitting outside. The teachings are always held in the Spring, and inevitably, it starts out with three days of good weather, and then it rains, hails and the wind blows. You're sitting outside four hours everyday listening to teachings. Monks and nuns aren't allowed to cover their right arm or head during teachings, so you're sitting there completely frozen and numb. It's crowded and you don't have sofas and armchairs and things – you're sitting on the ground in someone else's lap and someone's sitting in your lap. There's no way you could possibly stretch your legs, because there's no place to put them!

Even in Dharamsala you are having to put up with a lot of difficulties. The water runs out in McLeod Ganj, and you can't have a hot shower. But people still come and they go through this because they see the value of listening to teachings! The fact that we have it so cushy in America, I think sometimes it makes us spoiled. We take things for granted, because we're just so comfortable all the way around. Our teachers are very kind in the sense of making things comfortable for us.

3. Their kindness in inspiring us

Our teacher instructs us, and by listening to the teachings, it transforms our mind, it inspires us, it activates us and energizes us, so that we will want to improve ourselves, so that we can see our good qualities.

They say that our teacher also inspires us by criticizing us. Again, this depends on our own level of mind. If we are very weak-minded, then our teachers tend to be very, very nice to us. It's only when we have enough internal strength that then our teachers can start to criticize us. If we're weak-minded people--I mean just look at how we usually react to criticisms. We usually run away, don't we? Somebody criticizes us, and we go, "They're wrong! Who's going to listen to them?" We just don't go near them in the future. This is because of our weak mind, because of our own attachment to sweet words and our aversion to hearing anything disagreeable about ourselves, and our own unwillingness to check up on our own thoughts and speech and deeds.

Examples

When we, through the practice, start to develop some character, then our teachers start coming on stronger on us. Lama Yeshe was such a good example. I remember this well. Lama would give teachings to the new students. He would walk into the room, and everybody would just completely beam. He somehow had this incredible compassion that touched people's hearts. He would sit down on the Dharma throne and start to teach. Lama had this way of cracking jokes, jokes relating to the Dharma, which showed us our own states of mind. He would crack these jokes, and all the new students would just crack up. But all the old students would go... We knew what Lama was talking about when he cracked the joke, especially when he made fun of some of our actions. It's like "Woh!" That was really pointing the finger at us. He could do that because there was already some trust in the relationship between us.

Once when I was in Taiwan, I had been at an inter-religious conference. At the end of the conference, the master who helped sponsor it, introduced some of his students who had helped with the organization of the conference. There were a few nuns and one monk up there on stage. He was introducing them – this person did this and that person so kindly did this and this person did that. He then came to this one monk, and he said, "But this guy...I gave him all these responsibility for this conference, and he didn't get it done. He constantly let me down. He would just bungle it!" The master stood there and went on to criticize this monk in front of everybody who attended the conference! I was sitting there thinking, "This monk must really be something, the fact that his teacher feels he is together enough to be criticized in public. That's saying something for his level, where he's at. The fact that he can bear that, and the fact that they actually have quite a close relationship so the teacher can do this. The monk didn't freak out and start crying and run away. He realized he had a heart connection with his teacher. He had the sense to realize that what his teacher was doing was very good for him.

In talking with some of the Chinese nuns at Kirkland about how we are trained, in the Chinese monasteries, the teacher walks around and supervises what everybody is doing. If you're messing up

somehow, if your attitude is incorrect, or your body language is harsh or whatever, the teacher, right there and then, no matter who's around, will correct you. It's showing some strength of character on the part of the students that the teacher is able to do that kind of thing.

We say that our teacher is kind to us by inspiring us through even correcting our mistakes. It's only through correcting our mistakes that we're going to learn. In actual fact, when you have a teacher, our teachers have the responsibility to correct our mistakes. That's why we've chosen teachers. We realize we make mistakes, and we want them corrected. We want to become a Buddha. When our teacher points out our mistakes, we should remember that they are fulfilling their responsibility to us. It's also a token of their kindness to care about us, our spiritual development, and to correct us when we're going sideways.

4. Their kindness in including us in their circle of students and providing for us materially

"Providing for us materially" is generally referring to the students who are ordained. In other words, when someone is ordained, they've given up having a livelihood. Their teacher tries to care for them materially in arranging a good situation. It doesn't mean that your ordained teachers give you money. It's referring to the people who have taken ordination under certain teachers, then those teachers provide for them materially.

"Their kindness in including us in their circle of students" means taking care of us, welcoming us, letting us participate and helping us along. Contemplating this kind of kindness or the benefit we receive from our teacher is very, very helpful for our mind – it makes our heart very glad. It's similar to the meditations of developing loving-kindness for others that we will be doing later. These meditations center on remembering the kindness of others towards us. In other words, remembering the benefit we've received from others by constantly making an effort to remember everything others have done for us. It makes us much more appreciative of our present circumstances. In this way, we remove the mind that likes to complain and grumble about how everything isn't going well. It makes us realize how good things are going and it makes us appreciative of that. The meditation here on seeing the kindness of the teacher, is similar to the one that comes later on (seeing the kindness of sentient beings). Both make our minds happy. This helps us realize that we are loved and that other people do care about us.

How to rely on our teacher through our actions

The preceding section talks about how to rely on our teacher mentally through cultivating a good gratitude. And now, this is how to put that attitude into practice through our physical and verbal actions.

1. Offering material

The first thing is to offer material. Making offerings to our teachers is something that's actually done for our own benefit. We usually see giving something to somebody else as being for their benefit, and somehow we lose out. It's good to remember that being generous is something that's for our own benefit, too. There're advantages when making offerings to our spiritual teachers.

First of all, our spiritual teachers are very powerful karmic objects for us. According to the kinds of relationships we have with people, they can become more or less powerful karmically for us. Any action we create in terms of them becomes weightier or lighter, correspondingly. Somebody is our spiritual teacher because of the very specific benefit and role that person has in our development. Any action we do with them creates a lot of very strong karma. A little bit of anger creates strong karma. Making some offering towards them creates very strong karma. That's why in our meditation, we visualize the field of positive potential (which includes our teachers) and then we imagine making offerings and prostrations and offering the universe to them. This is a way of creating a lot of positive karma, by making offerings to our teachers. In our meditation, these offerings are mentally transformed offerings, but when we have the possibility to make actual offerings, it's good to do that too because it creates very strong karma. Making offerings is a way to create a lot of good karma quickly, and in that way, it benefits us.

This doesn't mean you have to make extravagant, lavish offerings. You don't go into debt making offering to your teacher [laughter]. You offer according to your own ability. The most important thing when you offer to your teacher is to have a kind and generous heart. Think, "I'm making this offering for the benefit of all sentient beings so that I can attain enlightenment." In other words, don't think "I'm making this offering because if I don't, everybody else is going to give me a dirty look," or "because my

teacher is going to wonder why I'm so cheap." Or "because I'm obliged to give something", or "because I'm going to feel guilty if I don't", or any of those kinds of afflicted [Note: 'afflicted' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'deluded'] attitudes. We should have joy in our heart and do it for the benefit of others. Whatever material thing we're capable of giving comfortably, we make that offering.

Also, when we offer material, it enables our teachers to do the things that they need to do to benefit others. If we don't support our teachers, they won't have the wherewithal to benefit others. One of my teachers, Lama Zopa, makes a lot of offerings whenever he has the opportunity. When we went to Tibet, he had a big puja. He offered things to all the people who attended. He made offerings at the Kalachakra in Bodhgaya. He offered to the monasteries. The only way he has that ability to make offerings is through his students making offerings to him. The only way he has the ability to go around the world and teach others is through his students offering him the airfare. In actual fact, when we make offerings to our teachers, we're giving them the ability to help other people. We're giving them the ability to come and teach us. It works like that.

2. Paying respect and offering our service and help

Paying respect includes prostrating, or the Tibetan custom of circumambulating. These are formal ways of offering respect. It's a Tibetan custom to circumambulate holy objects or very powerful objects. For example in Dharamsala, His Holiness' residence is on top of the hill. There's also Namgyal Monastery, the main temple, and the Dialectic School. Around these, there is a very, very large path. It takes about maybe ½ hr or 40 minutes to make one loop. Maybe 20 minutes. It depends on how fast you want to go. Many, many people circumambulate this, because in the center you have His Holiness' residence, the monastery and the temple. It's a way of physically relating to holy objects in a beneficial way and also getting some exercise. This is something that's done.

We offer our service and help in order to help our teachers carry out their projects. It can be whatever our teacher needs help with, be it very simple things like cleaning their room or preparing their food, or helping other sentient beings. Very often, our teachers will call us in and say, "Please take care of that person," as they are busy and can't take care of everybody. My teachers have done that to me many times. That's how I learned the Nyung Nay practice. Rinpoche said, "I want you to do the Nyung Nay practice with this woman because she has cancer. She needs to do some purification."

When our teachers ask us to do things like this and we have the ability to do them, it's something very good to do. This is the way in which helping others very much relates to helping our teacher. Offering respect to our teacher is done through helping others, because the whole idea is that our teachers care more about sentient beings than about anything else. Whenever we help other sentient beings, even though we don't get a claim and a recognition (what our ego wants), this is really offering service to our teacher. We're doing what helps further the Dharma and further the happiness of sentient beings.

We offer our service and our help to our teacher, because our teacher is a powerful object of our karma. We accumulate a lot of positive potential. When we offer service, we enable our teacher to benefit others. We enable our teacher to benefit us! Very often, our teacher will ask us to organize things, or print things, or do who-knows-what. It isn't always easy. I remember this happening for years at Kopan. A meditation course was starting the next day, and the night before, we would be given a list of things to do that should have been done three weeks ago. We stayed up all night trying to get these things done so that the meditation course could go ahead. This is offering service.

I remember once in Italy (this is hilarious!), Rinpoche and Lama were arriving the next day and we were pouring concrete on the floor of the meditation room the whole night before! So here, offering service is making the preparations so your teachers can teach. So they can do the work that's very valuable for them.

Your teachers will give you all sorts of things to do. Don't think that you're always going to get all the real nice jobs. People think, "I want to be the one that makes tea for Lama, because then I get to go in the room. I get to hang out and pick up good vibes." [laughter] Then your teacher tells you to go clean the dog kennel, or to go help somebody who's just turned up, who needs somebody to sit with them all night because they're flipping out. Or he tells you to go edit something so that you're up all night typing, editing and printing something. We shouldn't have the idea that offering service is something that is very glamorous. But when our own minds are dedicated to practicing Dharma, then our mind offers service in a very happy way no matter how inconvenient it is. But like I said before, if something's beyond our

capability, then we have to be quite frank and say “I can’t do that.”

I remember when most of us first came to Kopan, we all wanted to meditate. You meet the Dharma and it’s so marvelous, all you want to do is drop everything and just sit and meditate. You take a few meditation courses, you do a retreat, and you meditate. Then Lama sends you out to work in a Dharma center. You’re thinking, “What’s this all about?” All of a sudden you have no time to meditate. You’re working with other people and you’re getting angry again. Other people are criticizing you. You have too much work and you’re not being understood. It’s a big hassle. You’re sitting there wondering, “All I want to do is meditate. Why is he telling me to do all these?” Then it finally hits you. This is actually a very skilful way of helping us to purify our negative karma, of helping us to get in touch with our own present mental state of mind instead of spacing out in our fantasy world of “I’m going to get enlightened next week!”

It’s also a way of offering service, and by offering service, you purify a lot of negative karma and accumulate a lot of positive karma. Through doing it and sticking it out, going through the hardship, and checking up your mind – why you’re doing this, what you’re doing, and why is your mind rebelling – you get a whole lot of information about your practice. This really helps to purify.

I should tell you the story of this one monk. He went into retreat and said he was going to stay in retreat until he got enlightened. Lama pulled him out of retreat and told him to go do business! [laughter] And he did it, and he’s still a monk! Really, this was Lama’s way of skillfully getting him back on planet Earth so that he could make some progress on the path.

3. Practicing according to our teachers' instructions

Offering material is the easiest way to rely on our teacher.

Offering our service, our time and energy is the next step up, which is much more difficult.

The hardest thing is to actually practice according to our teachers’ instructions. What this means is to practice the teachings that were given. Many times people misinterpret this point. They think that practicing your teacher’s instructions means only the things that the teacher tells them in a one-to-one interview, the things that the teacher tells them directly. If your teacher says, “Please bring me a glass of water,” then you think, “That’s my instruction!” and you run off to do it. But if you’re sitting in the class with maybe a thousand other students, and your teacher says, “Develop a kind heart,” then we think, “Well, he’s talking to so many people, that doesn’t apply to me. He’s talking to other people.” Or the teacher talks about abandoning the ten negative actions and to stop criticizing others. We think “I’m not at the level where I can stop criticizing others. He must be talking to all these other people. I won’t even try to practice that.” This is a wrong way of understanding this point. Following the instructions means trying to put into practice whatever teachings we’ve received from our teacher. No matter how many other people are in the audience together with us.

We shouldn’t think that following the instructions is just “Bring me a glass of water.” It’s all the instructions of all the teachings on the gradual path to enlightenment. That’s what we need to practice. It’s clear, the whole reason our teacher is here teaching us is for our benefit. The best way to repay their kindness is to actually put it into practice. Otherwise, what are they doing? They’re there teaching, teaching, teaching, and we don’t make any effort to change. The best way to show our appreciation for what they’re doing for us is to make the effort on our side to try and practice it. This is definitely the way to improve our own mind. We want to improve. That’s why we’re here to start with, isn’t it? We want to improve, and we improve by putting the teachings into practice.

It’s really nice when you feel a heartfelt connection with your teacher, then even if your teacher is not around – e.g. I don’t see my own teachers so often – still, whenever you’re trying to put into practice something that they’ve told you to do, you feel a connection with them. This is your offering to them. This is the real way to feel connected with your teachers when they aren’t around. Do your best to put their teachings into practice. But like I said last time, if some of the instructions are something that we can’t possibly do, or if it’s something that contradicts with basic Buddhist ethics, then we should definitely explain that we can’t do it, and why, and to seek some clarification.

Doing analytic meditation on Lamrim topics

We've covered this whole subject about how to cultivate a proper reliance on our teacher. This is a meditation subject for doing analytic meditation. In the previous talks, we went through and discussed all the prayers and visualization that we do at the start of a meditation session. We reached the point where Shakyamuni Buddha was on top of our head and we said the mantra. Now at this point in our meditation session, we do analytic meditation on some topic (e.g. this topic of proper reliance on our teacher or the topics that we're going to go into later on.) After doing your prayers and visualizing the Buddha on your head, what you do is to have your notes or the outline (if you know the points fairly thoroughly and don't need too much explanation) in front of you. Then you do the analytic (thinking or contemplative) meditation.

During the meditation, you're actually thinking about the different points to gain an understanding on the subject and to gain an experience in your heart. The thinking that you do is not necessarily intellectual blah-blah thinking. You're not thinking about the advantages of having a teacher and the disadvantages of not having a teacher and how to rely on a teacher like they're some abstract things up there. Rather, you think about it in terms of your life and your teacher's life. Think about it in a very heartfelt way. This is what you might call "Buddhist therapy." You talk to yourself. You become your own therapist. Your Buddha nature becomes your therapist. These teachings are your therapist. They're giving you something to reflect on. You can sit and reflect in a very orderly manner on the different points that are going to help you understand yourself better.

When you do any kind of introspective work, when you get some clarification, there's definitely an experience in your heart. It's not dry words and intellect. Similarly, as you think your way through these things, different feelings arise and different experiences come that definitely influence you. When you get a very strong feeling, when you feel like you've understood a certain point, then you stop at that point. You then do the stabilizing meditation or the one-pointed meditation.

You might meditate on the advantages of properly relying on a teacher, and you go through each point step by step. You read one, and then sit and think about it. You read a second one, then sit and think about it. Sometimes, you may think about it for a minute. Sometimes you may hit a point where there's so much to think about you might be there for half an hour. But you stay on each point and go down them. By the time you've gotten to the end of the eight advantages, some kind of feeling is probably arising in you about "Wow! Doing this is very beneficial, and I really want to do it." Something is happening inside. At this point you do the stabilizing or single-pointed meditation. You hold your attention on that point and just experience that feeling. Let it soak into you. And then you go on to the subsequent points.

Or sometimes when you're doing this analytical meditation, you read over your notes, you start thinking about it but you're stuck, "This is like mud! I don't get this at all!" At that point, if you're not getting something, if it's just not appearing clearly to you at all, try and at least formulate your questions. Try and at least understand what isn't clear to you. Then you can go back to your teacher and say "I don't get this point. I was thinking like dah dah dah dah dah, and somehow, it's like civil war inside and I'm not getting it." You ask for your teacher's aid.

So go through the different points, and think and contemplate on them. It really does change you when you do it. It changes your mind. It clarifies your mind and gives you more energy for your practice.

We've talked about how to cultivate a proper relationship with our teacher. Having done that, we will then go on to the actual way of training our mind. We've cultivated a good relationship with our teacher, now we can then learn the teachings and benefit from that. But before we do that, I want to open it up for questions so that we can discuss what we've covered so far here.

Questions and Answers

[Audience:] In one session do you go through all of the points of let's say, this meditation?

That depends on how long your meditation session is, how concentrated you are, and the rate at which you're meditating. In other words, you might do only the eight advantages during a session, or the eight

disadvantages, or both the advantages and disadvantages, or you might go through the whole thing. It depends on your own internal rhythm and your own feeling. If you only get as far as the eight advantages one day, then the next day, or the next meditation, review the eight advantages and then go on to the eight disadvantages. Or if you feel like there's still more in the eight advantages that you want to go through, you can go back through them and do that again, too. But what we're trying to do now is learn all the steps of meditation on the gradual path and gain some familiarity with all of them. It's good to move on from one subject to the next, but always reviewing the previous subject.

One thing I find that's really good: right before you dedicate, summarize your meditation so that you're clear about "This is what I've gotten out of this session." And then in your break time, in other words, after you've dedicated for that meditation session and you've gotten up and are going around doing all of your other things, try and bear that understanding in mind, to keep it alive,

[Teachings lost due to change of tape.]

...you can try and remember what you meditated on in the morning throughout the day, and just bear it in mind as time goes on, so that the understanding remains with you. Eventually, as you become very familiar with all these different meditations and the steps on the path, it becomes a very handy tool kit. As you encounter different circumstances and situations, you're better able to tune into the right meditation very quickly, and it becomes quite powerful.

Also, what does happen sometimes is you might be sitting and thinking about all these things, and you might get stuck at a certain point, and then some time later, something might happen in your life or somebody might say something to you. All of a sudden, (snap of fingers) something clicks! It's like, "Oh, yeah, that's exactly what this meditation is about!"

Or something happens in your life and you remember one of these points you've meditated. Some very strong feeling comes in your mind because you're capable, at that moment in your daily life, of seeing the connection between the Dharma and your life.

[Audience:] How do you balance meditation practice with service?

This is a vast topic. It's going to vary a lot from individual to individual. Some people are happy to offer service, but when we have a lot of restless energy, then even if we sit down and try to meditate, our knees hurt, our back hurts. Even if they don't hurt, our mind can't concentrate. The mind is like bubbling water. Many people realize that, but they still have a lot of faith and commitment to the teachings. They like to do something that's more active, because that enables them to put their Dharma understanding and their faith and commitment into daily practice. This is very effective for them. They prefer to do things this way. Young people especially have a lot of energy and it's nice to have service-oriented things to put their energy into and to help them mature as a human being.

It also commands some wisdom on our part. Some people go so much into service, that they get completely burnt out. Or you're so busy offering service, you have no time to meditate. You wind up getting angry at the people you're working with in offering service. At this point, I think, you have to set off your own internal burglar alarm. When you're going too much on the side of service that you're neglecting your meditation, when you're becoming difficult to live with, agitated, angry and dissatisfied, this is really a signal of "Hold on, I need to re-align and take more time and space for myself. Do more solid meditation." At this point you need to either work it out with the other people you're working with to give you more free time, or go to your teacher and say, "Can you replace me with somebody else because my mind is completely bananas right now?" I don't think it's wise to let ourselves get burnt out. Unfortunately, sometimes we do.

I think one of my most important teachings was when I got burnt out. I learned I should not let this happen again. My teacher could have talked all he wanted about balance, balance, balance, but it wasn't until I got myself so exhausted that I couldn't move, that I actually understood that it's OK to say "No". I'm not necessarily selfish when I say "No". I have to keep myself on my feet otherwise I can't help anybody! Sometimes you have to get to that point of burnout to learn from it, and it becomes a very powerful lesson that you couldn't have learned otherwise through lots of words. You have to fall into it yourself first.

If you're the kind of person that is attracted to meditation, and that's what you really want to do and you

check with your teacher and your teacher says, “Yes, go for it,” then do it! No problem. Now if you want to meditate because you can’t stand being around other people, you don’t want to work with all these obnoxious people to offer service, then you have to think, “OK, I do need my meditation to get myself together, but I can’t run away from things. I have to put my meditation into practice.” Then you see offering service as an extension of your meditation. It’s a two-way awareness.

Also, some people fall into the extreme of doing a lot of service because they want to avoid meditation. At this point, your teacher might help you balance again. If you realize this yourself, you might ask for a little bit of help from outside to put you into a little bit more disciplined situation where you’re meditating more.

[Audience:] Is the stabilizing meditation necessarily non-conceptual?

No, it can be either. In other words, sometimes you might focus on the feeling aspect of it a lot. Other times the feeling and the conclusion you reach in your meditation are completely together. Like for instance, you’re meditating on the preciousness of human life, and you come to this strong feeling of “I want to make my life meaningful”. The words “I want to make my life meaningful” become completely mixed together with the feeling “I want to make my life meaningful”. You hold on to the whole thing. It doesn’t mean you keep reciting those words to yourself, but you hold on to that whole thing. You’re not sitting there thinking and saying words. Whatever conclusion you have (and a conclusion can be a concept), you hold on to that single-pointedly. If your feeling starts to fade, if the intensity of that conclusion blurs, then you go back to more thinking and analysis to re-invigorate it.

[Audience:] What does it mean to say that we wouldn’t recognize Shakyamuni Buddha if we encountered him?

The form of the Buddha’s mind appearing as Shakyamuni Buddha, was a very special form. It’s called the supreme nirmanakaya, or the supreme emanation body. In order to perceive the Buddha as the emanation body, in other words, to see all the special signs and physical marks on his body, it isn’t just a question of having an eye organ and an eye consciousness. We need a lot of good karma to perceive it. The things we see are very much our karmic vision. The purer our karma is, the more we can see. The more obscured our mind is, because of negativities, then the more things appear depressed, uncomfortable, and dull. If our own minds are obscured, then even if Shakyamuni Buddha came in here with a body of golden light with wheels on the palms of his hands and the other 32 signs and 80 marks, we wouldn’t see them.

Just to show you how our mind works. We sit and talk about Milarepa, the great Tibetan meditator from the 11th, 12th century. He killed many people, but felt tremendous regret about it. He went and studied with Marpa and put up with all the hardship. Milarepa went on into a cave to meditate and he was so dedicated to his practice that when there was no food around, he just ate nettles. It was freezing cold, but he meditated and he attained enlightenment. We sit and say, “Wow, Milarepa is so wonderful!” But if Milarepa were to walk in this door, we would probably tell him to get out because he was dirty, had matted hair, didn’t have shoes, was green (from eating the nettles) and had bad breath – didn’t brush his teeth. People even complained about Jesus, especially all the parents who didn’t want their kids to have long hair. If Jesus were their son, they would probably have kicked him out of the house for having long hair! This has a lot to do with our own way of thinking. We don’t always perceive other people’s qualities, even though they have those qualities.

[Audience:] Must spiritual teachers be ordained people?

Your teachers don’t have to be monks and nuns. They can also be lay people. There’re many excellent lay teachers.

Learning from every person & situation we encounter

[In response to audience:] This is part of developing a more flexible mind, where we tune in to all the circumstances that life presents us. We can learn something from every person we encounter, from every situation we experience.

I remember when I came back from my first meditation course. I was completely glowing: “The Dharma’s so wonderful, and I’m really going to try and practice it!” One day I stopped somewhere in town to get some doughnuts at a bakery. When I was going back to the car, there was one homeless person leaning up against the wall looking spaced out. I thought, “I’m going to be this incredible bodhisattva and give him a doughnut.” I took one of my prized doughnuts out and I gave it to him thinking, “Look how I’m

putting the teachings into practice.” He stood there and held the doughnut. He just crumbled it in his hands, and it fell all over the parking lot. This doughnut that I had just paid good money for was now crumbs on the floor. He didn’t think twice about this! This was an incredible lesson for me – I mean I haven’t forgotten it 16 years later! This was an incredible thing to learn from this person – about my own expectations, about what does it mean to help somebody. I think many times there’re many situations in life that can be like this for us.

Creating the cause to meet Maitreya Buddha

[In response to audience:] Well, if we were alive at the time of the Buddha, we probably wouldn’t still be hanging around doing what we are doing now. The disciples at the time of the Buddha...[Audience speaks.] We have our limitations, but we have accomplished something. If you read the sutras, you’ll see that the disciples at the time of the Buddha were gaining realizations right, left and center! They had incredible accumulations of positive karma from previous lives. Take the case of the Buddha’s first five disciples. They swore at him saying they were not going to talk to him when he first came up to teach, but somehow his whole presence magnetized them. He gave this teaching and at the end, they were all well along the path. One of them even gained realizations. There’re all these teachings in the scriptures about people getting very quick realizations. This is because they’ve done a lot of work beforehand. And so probably, if we were born at the time of the Buddha, we would have been that kind of person and not hanging around now. Maybe at the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, when he was there in India, we were born in some other universe in some other life form. Or we could have been a cow on the road as the Buddha walked by, and our mind stream got blessed by us being a cow and seeing the Buddha. This may have become elaborated on through many lifetimes so here we are now.

They say Maitreya Buddha is going to be the next wheel-turning Buddha. In other words, the next Enlightened Being who is going to give the teachings and turn the wheel of the Dharma after this present age. What we can do now is to create the cause so that we can be born as Maitreya’s students and gain quick realizations at that time.

We’ll stop here. Let’s do a little bit of digestion meditation now. Let everything sink in. Try and remember the points so that you can hold on to them and continue to contemplate them later on.

This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>