



MINDROLLING INTERNATIONAL

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Buddhism in Practice, Practice In Buddhism

Her Eminence Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche gave this teaching in Prague, Czech Republic in 2003.

Given the title “Buddhism in Practice, Practice in Buddhism,” we could begin by trying to understand what a Buddhist view of practice actually means.

In today’s world with its vast and fast development of media, mass communications, and technology, we are all much closer and our communications are much quicker and more effective. The upside of such closeness and speed is the opportunity to learn whatever we want to learn. More than ever before we have easy access to whatever interests or fascinates us—including the spiritual world with its various religions, philosophies, and doctrines.



Buddhism, too, has become well known and easily accessible—and not just the traditional philosophy and advanced teachings. There is a growing understanding that Buddhist philosophy is vast. People have become more familiar with the teachings on compassion, with various meditation practices, and with what is meant by the Buddhist “view.”

The downside to the rapidly growing interest in Buddhist philosophy—or anything else—is that it may not be properly guided.

When we talk about a belief system or a philosophy of life, we are talking about something very precious, something we must be very serious and careful about adopting into our lives. But with such rapid growth of interest, there is the danger of doing something just because it’s fashionable or to satisfy our curiosity, without necessarily understanding its true meaning or motivation.

Whenever we are more attracted to the outer form of any philosophy or way of life—not just Buddhism—there is the danger of not understanding its real intent. This lack of understanding will prevent us from deriving any real benefit, particularly from something as profound as the Buddhist doctrine.

How To ...

Walk into any bookstore today, and you will find any number of books on how to make your life better, how to cure all sorts of ills, how to practice meditation; or just browse the Internet and there will be a multitude of sites covering the same topics. This easy access to knowledge has a good side.

Increasing your knowledge, finding better ways of living, better ways to understand one another, or simply ways make weekends more fruitful or life more relaxing—there is some purpose and goodness in all of this. And anyone who practices meditation or studies any philosophy or doctrine also does so with the intention of getting some good from it.

But when we talk about Buddhism and Buddhist practice, we are not talking about doing something for temporary relief. Practice is not something we do because it is popular or makes us feel good, nor is the purpose of Buddhist practice to attain short-term gains or satisfy a curious mind. What then is the meaning of practice?

The word “practice,” in this context, is a translation of the Tibetan word *nyamlen* (*nyams len*). Nyamlen means to actually follow whatever it is that one has understood to be of value; the expanded meaning is to adopt that as one’s life path. This is the meaning of practice.

Practice should therefore begin with careful thought and reflection, to understand the value of whatever you are about to adopt into your mind and life. From thinking and reflecting carefully, confidence arises. Without taking time to properly investigate, examine, and contemplate the value of what you are doing, confidence cannot arise.

From this perspective, Buddhist practice is not about adopting theories, ideologies, principles, or lifestyles. Practice is about the confidence that naturally arises in your mind when you take the time to investigate and understand the meaning of what you are doing. Thus you are no longer separate from the value you have understood, and you are able to put that into action.

So on one hand, we have the confidence that comes naturally from our own understanding. On the other hand, we must also be aware of our human patterns. Because the human mind is still stuck with structure, we wonder where to begin, how to proceed, and whose example to follow.

Ask, and You Will Get an Answer

Shakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment and began teaching in India a little more than 2500 years ago. Later, in the eighth century, the Buddhist teachings travelled to Tibet. Looking at the history of Buddhism, we can see that from the very beginning it is a non-theistic religion with a very simple premise. Buddhism is about the realization of absolute truth—towards which each of us must work with our own clear insight, thinking, and wisdom.

This is the main teaching and emphasis of the doctrine. There is no form involved in this. In fact, going back to the teachings of the Buddha himself, we see a very strong emphasis on not bringing in any form. Then, however, people began to interpret the teachings. And because we human beings are enormously capable of complicating things, there are as many interpretations of “absolute truth” as there are human beings.

Because of the human mind’s curiosity and constant need for structure and support, this non-theistic, non-form-oriented view had to be spoken about in a theistic way, with principles and practices to cultivate, activities to abandon, and so on. The structured paths we have today are simply in response to that mind that needs structure and support to understand the truth.

When the Buddha began to teach, he taught one simple thing: practice selfless compassion at all times. Very simple and very logical—we all understand the importance of selfless compassion; we are all taught to be compassionate, generous, and kind. But by the time this simple teaching went from India to Tibet, it probably met with questions like “OK, I understand the value of selfless compassion, but what *is* kindness, and how do I actually practice being kind?” Thus a formless, non-theistic philosophy began to require a formatted path of practice.

You may *want* to be selflessly compassionate but you wonder about where to begin, and how to practice when you encounter difficulties, hesitation, or a mind that doesn’t understand how to be selfless. What then?

When you ask such questions, you will definitely get an answer. In some sense, we could say this is why there are the great enlightened buddhas and bodhisattvas who manifest and teach—and whose teachings form the basis of the path of practice.

Someone who really can practice selfless compassion doesn’t have to follow any form. On the other hand, if the goal of the path is to generate selfless compassion, how and what can we practice to actually realize this? To simply sum it all up by saying, “Do this and it will lead to realization,” presents

enormous difficulties. And even though I seem to be talking about how and what to practice most of the time, I, myself, often encounter difficulties.

When I travel by plane, for example, if I sit next to someone unfamiliar with Buddhism, it's often easier to pretend to be asleep. Because invariably they will say, "I'm interested in Buddhism, so what's the best and quickest way to practice?" And—be it simply the truth or based on one's own meagre experience and investigation—there is only one possible answer: Practise genuine kindness.

The practice of genuine kindness leads to realization—call it enlightenment or realization of absolute truth—which is none other than selfless compassion: the ability to go beyond self-attachment and self-grasping.

The Practice of Kindness in the Three Yanas

Shakyamuni Buddha expounded 84000 tenet teachings. Today, 2500 years later, the Buddhist teachings are so vast, it would be difficult to understand them all within one human lifetime. In summation, however, these teachings have been gathered into three main slogans, or practices.

1. ***Do no harm to anyone***—First train yourself so that, within your lifetime, you do not bring any harm to another sentient being.
2. ***Cultivate the good and virtuous***—The second level of practice is to adopt the kind of life that offers the possibility to cultivate all things that are good and virtuous.
3. ***Train in awareness at all times***—The third level of understanding is to exert effort in training the mind to develop awareness at all times.

If you examine these three instructions, you will see the three levels of understanding, or three *yanas*, within the Buddhist doctrine: the hinayana, mahayana, and vajrayana.

Practice on the path of hinayana—or sutrayana as it's called nowadays—is based on self-discipline. Through awareness, discipline, and the ability to discern what is useful and what is harmful, we abandon useless and harmful activities. We could say that the hinayana path of practice is about morality, or self-discipline.

Practice on the Mahayana path, the "path of transformation," not only keeps us from harming others, it allows us to develop the potential for helping them. Having developed self-discipline, we can expand a disciplined attitude

towards the world and begin to involve others on our path. In this way, we can tap into qualities that might actually be helpful and allow us to be of some use to others. Such practices are referred to as the Mahayana path.

Practice on the vajrayana path, the “path of transcendence,” is about training the mind in such a way that transcendence arises. It is training the mind by knowing the nature of mind; and it is knowing the nature of mind by developing awareness of what the mind is. Simply put, the vajrayana trains in awareness of the true nature, such that all falsity collapses. When the true nature is revealed, the ability to transcend our constant attachment to “self” spontaneously arises—thus allowing genuine compassion to spontaneously pervade. This is the vajrayana path of practice.

Due to the “easy access” we talked about earlier, many people are familiar with these various levels and methods of practice. But easy access can sometimes lead to misunderstanding. It is a misunderstanding, for example, to think that you first practice hinayana, then graduate to mahayana, and then go on to vajrayana. Even more common is the misunderstanding that you can jump into whichever yana you like, right away. This would be taking theory very literally—without understanding that theory must become part of your life.

Theory helps us to understand a philosophy, like a key that opens a gate. But having opened the gate, you still have to take the first steps. You still have to analyze and examine the theory to understand its meaning and value. By understanding its value, you gain confidence in the theory. Then you can begin to actually practice and understand it in a way that allows for maturity and growth.

The three yantras are not about taking on certain philosophies simply because we like the teacher, or we’ve read the books and are fascinated with the ideas. The three yantras reflect the maturity of the mind.

From Bud to Full-blown Flower

The final fruition of the path of meditation is said to be enlightenment. This, too, can be viewed from the three levels of understanding.

Theoretically, enlightenment is about recognizing absolute truth. But to recognize absolute truth, you must first develop the wisdom to completely abandon or destroy all that is false. If you become a Buddhist to attain enlightenment, or you become a vajrayana meditator to swiftly realize absolute truth, practically speaking you must first understand the basic pattern of all that is negative or false—which means first examining and working with yourself. How much of your ground, right now, is actually based on wisdom and self-awareness?

The three yantras could be seen as the gradual blossoming of a flower: gradually mind comes to understand the importance of truth. Like the bud of a flower, our understanding of truth as “something to be studied” flowers into an understanding of inherent truth.

Until then, there are many methods and paths of practice that allow for mind’s maturation to gradually take place. If you need to meditate, there is meditation. If you need to study, there is study. You can renounce everything and go into a cave, and you can come back and work with compassion for all sentient beings. Therefore, there are three main yantras in Buddhism—although, in fact, there are as many yantras as there are human beings and ideas.

The aim is always to realize absolute truth—and through this realization, to generate the selfless kindness and compassion that overcomes ignorance. An ignorant mind constantly grasping to a self is what impedes our ability to realize our basic goodness and to develop selfless compassion.

So how do we overcome ignorance? How do we actually come to an enlightened state? We find ourselves asking the same questions today that were asked when Buddhism first came to Tibet.

It is useful to know that when the first Buddhist scholars and teachers were invited from India by the kings of Tibet, they did not immediately teach the profound vajrayana teachings. Nor did they teach the many mahayana teachings. The first Buddhist teachings to come into Tibet were the basic hinayana practices.

Historically Tibet was considered a “barbarian” country. This did not mean that Tibetans were barbarians in the ordinary sense. They were intelligent human beings—who nevertheless did not give themselves the time and space to actually do things in accordance with their basic human potential. They were barbarians in the sense of not fully utilizing that human potential.

Every animal is capable of eating, sleeping, drinking, and walking around. Caring about one’s own survival and thinking only of one’s self—even animals do this. Yet we human beings are a very intelligent lot; scientifically we view ourselves as the most intelligent of all species. What is it, then, that we human beings can do beyond surviving and protecting ourselves? We can realize our human potential fully.

To this end, the first teachings brought into Tibet were the hinayana precepts. The great teachers did this by introducing them as Tibet’s first constitution.

The first fundamental constitution of Tibet called for adopting the ten virtuous actions and abandoning the ten unvirtuous actions.

Key to Enlightenment, Grounds for a Constitution

To understand Buddhist philosophy, it is essential to begin with the practise of the ten fundamental disciplines of the hinayana path. The ten virtuous actions describe the very simplest things that any human being should naturally be doing.

The ten *un*-virtuous actions describe what to abandon: the three unvirtuous actions of body, four of speech, and three of mind. The three unvirtuous activities of the body are killing, stealing, and indulging in sexual misconduct. The four of speech are lying, slandering, speaking harsh or angry words, and gossiping. The three unvirtuous activities of mind are to have ill will toward another, to covet, and to have wrong views.

When I myself began to study Buddhism, our teachers always wanted to make sure we understood which ten activities to abandon and which ten to cultivate—while we always wanted to hurry on to the profound teachings, like the true nature of mind. But it is only possible to be in such a tremendous hurry when you have not yet realized one thing: the key to understanding the nature of mind—enlightenment, absolute truth, you call it what you will—lies in these ten very basic activities.

It is fairly simple to identify unvirtuous activities. On the surface, we all assume we don't go around killing, stealing, or indulging in sexual misconduct. But when theory is put into practice and we examine our actions more closely, we might find we kill and lie all the time. And while not openly indulging in sexual misconduct, who knows what goes on in our minds?

Take killing for example. A human being in search of enlightenment should at least be aware that the life of another is as precious as one's own. But how many animals and other sentient beings had to give up their lives to enable this human body to survive? We harm sentient beings, in one way or another, with every physical act. In the same way, while we may not break into houses to steal, we definitely take things that don't belong to us. And if we cannot even discipline our bodies, it's useless to get into speech and mind. Speech and mind are very evasive and well hidden. Can you honestly say you don't lie, gossip, speak harsh or angry words, slander, criticize, or have ill intentions toward anyone?

Without any religious or spiritual connotations, these fundamental disciplines are considered part of our human nature. As parents, teachers and elders, we

teach our children these simple things. Why then—with all our human qualities and acquired knowledge—do we still find it difficult to cultivate the ten virtuous actions and abandon the ten unvirtuous ones?

If this intelligent human mind cannot even abandon actions that are universally known to be negative, harmful, and useless, how can it understand absolute truth, develop selflessness, and let go of all attachment? A basic Buddhist principle says: Just as I want happiness, all sentient beings want happiness. Just as I fear and don't want pain and suffering, all sentient beings fear and do not want pain and suffering. But are the actions of this physical body aware and respectful of life? And if there is no respect for life, how can this mind be called a "human" mind—or realize anything as valuable as enlightenment or freedom from suffering? Anyone on a spiritual path, any spiritual path, needs to consider this question.

One Simple Moment of Awareness

To take the hinayana precepts to heart and put them into practice makes us aware of the subtleties of carelessness. Carelessness gradually grows into ignorance, and ignorance becomes this solid block of a human being who wants happiness, without understanding that we ourselves create the causes of our suffering. Greater awareness of our actions brings greater clarity about who we are as human beings—and this allows us to gradually recognize our true nature.

You might try to do things better with the compassion and methodical practices and meditations of Mahayana. These are certainly helpful. But other than compassion, what *is* the natural outcome of conscientiously observing the hinayana path? Hinayana practice—with its awareness of the actions of body, speech, and mind, genuinely free of harming others—spontaneously fruitions as the mahayana mind.

You might train the mind to generate awareness using various vajrayana methods: visualizations, mantras, meditation practices, and retreats. But without awareness, how could anyone practice the hinayana path of abandoning the ten unvirtuous actions or cultivating the ten virtuous actions?

You cannot help but develop awareness if you are truly careful about not killing, stealing, or indulging in sexual misconduct. You cannot help but develop awareness if you are careful not to lie, slander, speak harsh, angry or hurtful words, or gossip; if you genuinely do not covet what is not yours, or have ill intentions toward another, or hold wrong views—which means not understanding the law of cause and effect, thus not understanding your own responsibility.

Seeing clearly and examining carefully these ten simple actions, we develop awareness: awareness of body, awareness of speech, and awareness of mind. We can call it dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, and nirmanakaya in the highest tantrayana level of Buddhism. We can call it relative truth, absolute truth, and inseparable nondual truth. And we can call ourselves hinayana, mahayana, or vajrayana practitioners. But it all comes down to the basic principle of not harming any sentient being with our body, speech, or mind. This would require us to be generous and compassionate, and to develop intrinsic awareness of our absolute true nature.

We may be attached to certain theories, principles, or levels of understanding. At times they can even be useful. But the essence of the highest teachings lies within a simple moment of awareness.

A Buddhist Practitioner, Nothing More or Less

You may assume you want to achieve enlightenment, but what would you do with it? Having developed constant, unwavering awareness, what then? An enlightened being would never harm anyone. If this is your aim, your practice should be in proportion to the fruition you so want to achieve.

The history of Buddhism in Tibet began with the ten fundamental and profound instructions of Shakyamuni Buddha. They are still of benefit today—whether or not you refer to yourself as a spiritual or non-spiritual person. You don't need to proclaim you belong to this or that belief. And as a Buddhist practitioner, it doesn't matter if you call yourself hinayana, mahayana, vajrayana, dzogchen, or mahamudra. The only thing that matters—no matter what you call yourself—is being able to put these ten actions into practice.

From a simple humanitarian point of view, this is essential. All the more so for a practitioner who has met with the Dharma and received such enormously valuable teachings. As long as you have a body and mind, it is necessary to clearly discern whether the actions of your body, speech, and mind are harmful or not. It is necessary to abandon those that are harmful and useless, and to exert effort to adopt those that are precious, helpful, and a cause of happiness for yourself and others.

Anyone who genuinely develops such awareness—even if you stubbornly refuse to be called a Buddhist—is nothing more or less than a Buddhist practitioner.

The most important thing is to practice sincerely. With the growing awareness of Buddhist teachings and culture, it is essential that you grow too—in a healthy way. Healthy growth is based on kindness and tolerance

among yourselves, and not losing touch with your basic sanity and basic intelligence.

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