

## 1.13 What to Adopt or Discard

Relinquishing our desire for and attachment to the mundane phenomena of cyclic existence is extremely difficult as we travel the path towards liberation. Until we have reached the first bhumi on the bodhisattva path, when all actions are dharma practice, it is difficult to discard our tendency toward self-deception. Sentient beings trapped in samsara experience reality through the six sense consciousnesses, creating a false duality between subject and object, which leads to attachment and aversion toward certain experiences. We must discard these dualistic notions of subject and object in order to attain liberation.

As regular sentient beings, our time is consumed by ordinary mundane activity without any essence; we must discard this way of living our life and transform all activity into the bodhisattva path. To not make this transformation is to waste our time and energy on meaningless activity. The length of our lives is constantly shrinking, passing quickly like a car speeding toward its destination on a freeway, yet we continue to fill our days and nights with meaningless activity.

We must discard this mode of existence and replace it with the altruistic path of the bodhisattva, on which every action is a dharma practice for the limitless benefit of countless sentient beings. We've had since beginningless time to be involved with the pursuit of meaningless activity in cyclic existence; now it's time to discard this path in favor of larger pursuits and wholesome activities. We must contemplate and meditate on what to discard, and what to adopt—when we do, we are engaging in the practice of buddha dharma.

## 1.14 Cyclic Existence of Samsara

It is impossible to experience permanent happiness while our mind dwells in the physical state. From the moment of birth we embark on a search for happiness and meaning that lasts our entire lifetime, yet we fail to find either one. Until we have reached extremely high levels of attainment in our practice and achieved extraordinary powers of true mind over matter, the pain and suffering of body and mind will continue.

As long as we continue to have this experience of a precious human existence, there is always room and opportunity to improve towards ultimate happiness and bliss. Suffering does not end until the cause and effect of karma end.

The activities of sentient beings trapped in samsara are meaningless. As far as dharma practitioners are concerned, until we reach a level where we never regress, only progress, all activity is meaningless. Once we have taken refuge in the dharma and begun to practice, only virtuous actions have meaning—any nonvirtuous action is meaningless. Virtuous actions are those that have a positive result or benefit for ourselves or others; nonvirtuous actions are those that have no benefit or negative results, even if they are neutral. To give purpose to this human existence we must be of benefit to all sentient beings, including ourselves, through dharma activity. Otherwise, even a long life full of activity only results in even more lack of true meaning.

The best and most generous gift is the gift of dharma, if it is given with an altruistic attitude. Any other kind of gift is merely a temporary relief from the pain and suffering of samsara, while the gift of dharma provides us with another tool to uproot the very cause of suffering.

## 1.15 The Ultimate Purpose of Life

Life has no ultimate purpose unless we liberate ourselves from the suffering and pain of samsara through the practice of buddha dharma. Throughout our lives we might study and learn so many things, but these studies have no ultimate purpose if they do not serve to liberate us from the darkness of ignorance.

The time we spend with countless teachers, gurus, and lamas over the course of our lives has no ultimate purpose unless we receive the blessings and transmissions of their dharma lineage.

A lifetime spent mingling with a variety of yidam or deity practices has no ultimate purpose unless we receive genuine realization and mahasiddhi. Likewise, there is no ultimate purpose in a life spent practicing a variety of meditation techniques unless we develop one-pointed meditation.

When we spend our life struggling with negative afflictive emotions, it has no ultimate purpose unless we work to remove the root of these negativities through the practice of buddha dharma.

There is no ultimate purpose to a life spent going through the outer superficial motions and appearances of spiritual activity and practice with no genuine inner motivation driven by bodhichitta. In order for us to attain liberation, all of our outer spiritual activities and practice must be motivated by a sincere inner devotion to benefit all sentient beings through our limitless love and compassion.

## 1.22 Overcoming Negative Karma

Due to the influence of negative karma and a lack of clear understanding as to the purpose of life, we have a natural tendency towards engagement with samsaric activities and a forgetfulness of the impermanence of life and the certainty of our own death.

Due to the negative karma accumulated through our own ego-clinging—the attachment to the concepts of “self” and “other”—we treat other sentient beings with disrespect, not realizing that, ultimately, we have deceived ourselves and are operating from a position of ignorance and confusion.

Due to the influence of negative karma accumulated as a result of desire, we develop attachment to loved ones, indifference toward strangers, and aversion or even hatred toward enemies. We don’t realize, of course, that ultimately we have deceived ourselves with this conditional love; we have failed to develop bodhichitta, which is unconditional love toward all living beings.

Due to the influence of our own negative karma, we fall into habits of selfishness, greed, and miserliness; ultimately we have deceived ourselves, for we have failed to practice contentment beyond conditions for the benefit of all sentient beings. Practicing contentment which transcends where we are, what we have, and who we are with is one of the most difficult practices for sentient beings still trapped in cyclic existence. Indeed, success in the practice of contentment is what draws a line between beginning and advanced practitioners.

Due to the influence of our own negative karma, we fall into laziness and procrastination and, ultimately, we deceive



ourselves into failing to contemplate and meditate—the only practice that will free us from the bondage of this karma.

The only solution, the only thing that offers us a source of liberation from samsara, is to dig up the very root of negative karma by practicing the six perfections and increasing our merit and wisdom for the benefit of all sentient beings.

## 2.5 Dissolution of the Elements

Within the first bardo, or intermediate state, of the process of death we experience the dissolution of the connection between the mind and the physical body. These six bardos that appear to the minds of unenlightened beings are a mere appearance of superficial reality. However, these bardos do arise in the minds of confused beings and appear quite real to those still attached to samsara. The sages have said that, generally speaking, as long as we cling to the existence of samsara and nirvana, the existences of all sentient beings within the six bardos are included.

The first bardo is one of the most difficult times we experience as sentient beings. Due to the process of separation of mind from body, our mind becomes erratic in its perception of reality, shifting alternately between experiences of luminous clarity and terrifying states of darkness and confusion. These unusual experiences that result from erratic states of mind are the signs and symptoms of the impending separation of mind and body.

During the process of death, the elements that comprise our physical existence become imbalanced and begin to separate from each other. As a dying being, our own earth element dissolves into the external universal earth element and becomes so heavy as it descends that it becomes impossible for us to sit up or hold our position without assistance. Our water element dissolves into the external water element, leaving our limbs and organs dry and shrunken; even the color of our flesh fades, giving us the appearance of extreme dehydration. Furthermore, our air element dissolves, and this can be observed in the quality of our breath and our pulse as we



are dying. If our breathing becomes shallow, labored, short or rapid, or even stops outright, and if the pulse becomes weak or ceases altogether, these are all signs of the dissolution of the air element.

In addition, the fire element fades from our extremities into the heart chakra, leaving our limbs cold and feeling dead. However, there should be some amount of life left in the form of heat around the area of the heart, because we are not yet completely dead. The extremely advanced practitioner will continue to maintain this heat around the heart chakra while maintaining the physical meditation posture even after breathing and heartbeat have ceased, and this meditative samadhi can be maintained for up to a week. It is recommended that such a practitioner not be disturbed until he is no longer able to maintain the seated meditation position. We can see how close to death he or she is by pinching a small amount of skin and observing how quickly it returns to its original shape.

Each of these elements is borrowed from the universe at the moment of our conception in our mother's womb. At the completion of the process of separation between mind and body during the process of death, these elements are returned to the universe. During this process, a darkness closes in as we begin to lose the ability to perceive through the five ordinary senses. As the external senses shut down, it's like the sun setting on this lifetime, and the day of this life transforms into a moonless night. At this time our internal sense consciousness also begins to experience a feeling of being trapped. As the light fades from the outside world, the mind races but is caught like a bee in a jar—it buzzes around desperately, but no matter



how much or how fast it flies, it cannot escape because the lid is closed. Each of the five external sense consciousnesses, or skandhas, disconnects and is no longer able to function and provide perception of the external world. The eye consciousness ceases to provide perception of form, the ear consciousness ceases to provide perception of sound, and so on. As each of these five skandhas ceases to function, they merge with the sixth, the mind consciousness.

At this point in the death process, we will no longer respond to external stimuli, yet we are not truly dead. The mind consciousness has reached the border between life and death. In buddha dharma terms, we have entered the ultimate mandala. At the threshold of this borderline between life and death, upon entering the ultimate mandala, we will have either positive, welcoming experiences or negative, terrifying experiences. Our experience at this moment is entirely dependent upon our karma: if we have led a life focused on spiritual development, love, kindness, and compassion, our mind will experience the welcoming visions of paradise. But if our life was filled with anger, hatred, and aggression, our experience will be one of looking into a terrifying realm inhabited by deadly demons and monsters.

When we are initially conceived in the womb of our mother, we inherit two drops, or bindhu, from our parents. The white drop, received from the father, is located at the crown chakra of a living being. The red drop, received from the mother, is located at the root chakra. At the time of death, however, as we enter the ultimate mandala, these two bindhu move to-



wards each other to alaya, or fundamental consciousness, at the heart chakra.

When the two drops meet with the fundamental consciousness, the experience of dying beings differs. For some, the experience is like an earth-shattering explosion and the mind is finally and completely separated from the body. For others, the experience of separation is one of openness, luminosity, and clarity, like emerging into a glimmering cloudless sky. Whichever experience occurs, we can say that at this point the process of death is complete and we have entered the second bardo. This intermediate state between our death and our next rebirth, also called the sidpa bardo, is known as the bardo of becoming.

## 2.6 Mind beyond Death

We must learn that ultimate truth is beyond death. We must learn that our own intrinsic wisdom is beyond death. We must learn that the luminosity of dharmakaya is beyond death. We must learn that the undeceivable infallibility of karmic cause and effect is beyond death.

We must learn that space is beyond the extremes of hope, fear, doubt, and expectation; rather, it is limitless in its unobstructed possibility and therefore beyond death. We must learn to let go of our own ego-clinging, and realize the selflessness that is beyond death.

If we have attained these ultimate realizations, we can never be captured by the Lord of Death when he casts his net—we will continually slip through because we, too, will have moved beyond death.

## 2.7 Love without Expectation

Worldly pleasures such as name, fame, power, and wealth are inseparable from impermanence, and thus as true dharma students we should remain unattached and practice renunciation of those worldly pleasures and comforts.

These worldly dharmas can be used for the benefit of our dharma practice and all sentient beings, but only if we remain unattached to them. Your name and fame are impermanent, and although they can be as magnificent as the thunder and lightning of the most powerful storm, they quickly dissipate into the quiet of gentler weather.

Your wealth is also impermanent, for although it can be as great as the thickest and heaviest clouds that cover the four quarters of the sky, we should not become attached to wealth because it can be scattered as quickly as the wind scatters the clouds, leaving us with a clear sky.

It is also important to realize that these worldly dharmas of wealth and fame can be quite beneficial to us as dharma students if we use them for the benefit of our dharma practice as well as for the benefit of all sentient beings. These worldly dharmas actually pose no problem whatsoever as long as we remain unattached to them and maintain the understanding of their impermanence. These worldly dharmas will surely be of no use at the time of death: when the mind separates from the body, it leaves all worldly dharmas behind.

In our mundane existence, we develop love, affection, and even great attachment for many near and dear ones over the course of our lives. This does not necessarily create problems for us as true practitioners as long as we cultivate the understanding that these relationships we form are impermanent



and we don't allow our attachment to them to become obstacles to our dharma practice. In fact, for most of us these relationships actually provide us a reference point from which we learn to cultivate our love for all sentient beings without exception and free of conditions.

We also tend to develop affection towards our home and homeland, and this also is not necessarily negative as long as we continue to extend our understanding of the impermanence of our life in this home, and do not allow this affection to become an obstacle to our practice due to attachment and habitual behavior. The comfort and stability provided by a secure home can actually benefit our practice by allowing us more time and energy to practice the dharma and work to benefit others, but only if we can remain unattached to this home, which we should see simply as a tool to be used for the ultimate good.

Finally, as genuine dharma students we should neither develop attachment to pleasure and comfort nor aversion to pain and suffering, for they are like a dream, or like a reflection in a mirror—impermanent and empty of inherent existence.

## 6.6 Transform Your Deluded Mind

We must embrace negative emotions at the time they arise in our mind and transform them by cultivating an altruistic mind. Without the practice of altruism, it is impossible to transform the deluded mind to buddha mind. We must embrace an attitude of loving-kindness and compassion towards all living beings just as if they were our own mother or father. If your particular experience with your own mother or father is not the best example of love and compassion, just think of the one person you love the most in this world, and learn to love all beings in this way without bias or discrimination. We must learn to detach ourselves from our delusion of superficial reality, for as long as this attachment to appearances persists, our suffering will continue and the transformation to a buddha mind is made impossible. The root of our fundamental delusion is our very own mind. Without recognizing the nature of mind itself, it is impossible to uproot this deluded state.

We can transform all obstacles and afflictive emotions as we make our way along the path of liberation. Adverse circumstances that arise in our lives should be seen as teachings and blessings, as opportunities to practice and learn. In this light, negative situations are no longer hindrances, but have become fuel for our transformation to buddha mind.

Absence of distraction is the best kind of meditation, for if there is the slightest distraction, there is no meditation. The perfect meditation is the ordinary mind completely relaxed in its natural state of clarity, luminosity, and emptiness.