

THE HERO'S JOURNEY TO INTEGRATION:  
CULTIVATING ECSTATIC ALTRUISM  
THROUGH ROLE-MODELING IMAGERY, HEROIC NARRATIVE,  
AND NEUROLINGUISTIC INTEGRATION

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Forewords

by

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## BUDDHOLOGICAL FOREWORD BY ROBERT THURMAN

In our current era of global crisis, there are few traditions of civilizing wisdom and spiritual healing that hold more promise for helping humanity find true happiness than the timeless contemplative science and healing arts of Tibet. Over the last three decades, the enormous potential of this highly evolved tradition has increasingly been recognized in the West, leading to thousands of Tibetan spiritual learning centers around the world, and an ongoing dialogue between Western doctors and scientists and their Tibetan counterparts. A great advocate of this dialogue, His Holiness the Dalai Lama has repeatedly pointed to two of the cultural gems of Tibetan civilization he considers most beneficial and precious: its integrative system of medicine and its comprehensive psychological science. In fact, His Holiness often speaks of these two sciences as Tibet's great gifts to the human body and mind.

These two world-class healing arts and sciences converge in the related disciplines some call Tibetan psychiatry and neuroscience. In fact, these two are twin faces of one powerful contemplative science and technology of self-healing and self-transformation developed in Buddhist India and preserved in Tibet. While this integral mind/body science—embedded in the rich spiritual and ritual arts of the Buddhist Tantras—is distinctive to the Tibetan tradition, it also preserves and integrates the arts and sciences of personal liberation and

enlightened altruism we associate with the more familiar Buddhist traditions of South and East Asia.

This comprehensive approach, preserving all Buddhist teaching in a gradual curriculum integrated with Tantric psychiatry and neuroscience, was developed at the Buddhist monastic University of Nālandā in North India and transplanted into the monastic colleges and universities of Tibet. It is most fully and clearly articulated in the futuristic vision and multidisciplinary science of the *Kālacakra* or *Wheel of Time*, the most modern system of Vajrayāna Buddhist culture, of which His Holiness the Dalai Lama is the greatest living master.

According to the vision of the *Wheel of Time*, the future of humanity and our living planet lies in the global cultivation and spread of a science of lasting happiness, based on a system of contemplative learning and self-mastery meant to teach all humans to tap and harness our natural potential for heroic altruism inspired by unwavering bliss. As an integral part of that science, this synthetic tradition includes the whole gradual path of the Nālandā curriculum, since renunciation based on mindfulness and compassionate openness based on quiescence are vital prerequisites for Tantric practice, especially for Unexcelled Yoga Tantras like the *Wheel of Time*. In addition to the familiar methods of mindfulness and compassion, this comprehensive curriculum includes two extraordinary arts: the archetypal imagery of the Unexcelled Yoga creation stage; and the bliss-void intuition of the Unexcelled Yoga perfection stage.

It is my pleasure to share with you the Nalanda Institute Contemplative Guide Series, a complete introduction to Tibetan mind science that locates all four of its systems of self-healing and self-transformation in the context of current developments in medicine, psychology and neuroscience. This groundbreaking series takes the growing convergence of Western psychology and Buddhist contemplative science to the next level. It advances the dialogue not just by presenting the distinctive Tibetan approaches to mindfulness and loving-kindness, transcendent insight and altruistic compassion, but also by making the definitive arts of Tantric imagery and inspiration accessible in light of the classical system of the *Esoteric Community (Guhyasamāja)*, the synthetic teachings of the *Wheel of Time*, and the latest developments in Western therapy and neuroscience.

I know of no one better prepared to make this remarkable gift of Tibetan civilization accessible to a wider audience than the Founder and Director of the Nalanda Institute for Contemplative Science, my former student and close colleague, Dr. Joe Loizzo. Dr. Loizzo studied intensively with me at Amherst College, where he wrote a prize-winning Independent Study thesis, *Wittgenstein and the Madhyamika: Preparatory Studies for a Critical Psychology*. After receiving his medical degree at NYU, and completing his psychiatry training at Harvard, he picked up his Tibetan studies with me at Columbia University, where he completed his doctoral dissertation, *Chandrakīrti and the Moon-Flower of Nālandā: Objectivity and Self-Correction in India's Central Therapeutic*

*Philosophy of Language*. Since then, in addition to his translation study, *Nāgārjuna's Reason Sixty with Chandrakīrti's Commentary*, Dr. Loizzo has published key articles on the evolutionary psychology of *karma*, and the history of science at Nālandā and in the *Kālachakra* tradition. In addition to his work as a Tibetan scholar, he is both a practicing Buddhist psychotherapist and the developer and lead faculty of the *Nalanda Institute Four Year Program in Sustainable Happiness* offered at Tibet House U.S.

To help unpack the four systems of the gradual curriculum, Dr. Loizzo's Four Year Program has framed them in terms of the sacred architecture of the *Wheel of Time*, in which the mind/body process is mapped in four concentric spheres called the body wheel, speech wheel, mind wheel and bliss wheel. He has aligned these with the aims of Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna Creation Stage, and Vajrayāna Perfection Stage practice, which he terms personal healing, social healing, cultural healing and natural healing. The Nalanda Institute Four Year Program in Sustainable Happiness explains how these horizons of healing are linked with the four contemplative systems developed to realize them. It devotes a full year of evening classes, including two weekend retreats, to ground students in the science and living practice of each of these systems. The first year focuses on the basic science of Buddhist psychology and "deep mindfulness" or "natural mind" practice. The second focuses on the social psychology of compassion and the practice of "loving-kindness," "mind-training" or "mind-transforming." The third year covers the archetypal-narrative



psychology of creative self-transformation, and the Tibetan practice of “role-modeling imagery” or “heroic life-transformation.” And the fourth and last year touches on the neuropsychology of natural integration, and the integral breath-energy work of “sublimation” or “inspiration.”

The four horizons of this gradual, step-by-step curriculum and journey will be surveyed in the five volumes of Nalanda Institute Contemplative Guide Series, by Dr. Loizzo and his colleagues. Each volume distills the transcribed lectures of one of leg of the journey of the Four Year Program, with the pivotal second year divided into two volumes. Each volume references classical teachings and practices, and is woven together with all the others, following the distinctive Tibetan tradition of integrating all vehicles of contemplative learning into one gradual path to perfect enlightenment, conceived as a complete awakening and integration of mind, brain, and body. Each volume also takes the dialogue between Western and Buddhist science one step further, with thoughtful comparisons which show how Tibet's unique synthesis of all Buddhist psychology with the subtle-body model and mind/body methods of the Tantras anticipates and advances our fledgling brain-based approaches to psychiatry and psychotherapy.

Though traditionally the core disciplines of Tibetan Buddhism were guarded in secrecy, the modern system of the *Wheel of Time* sought to clarify their potential for all who had a sincere interest; and it also predicted a time when they would need to be introduced widely to the world. Now, given the

proliferation of popular misconceptions about the Tantras, His Holiness has encouraged Tibetan and Western scholars to make reliable information about them widely available, even though their advanced practice ultimately requires extensive preparatory training, well-developed altruistic motivation, sound understanding (such as provided in this series), and special blessings and initiations.

At this crucial time, when our troubled world needs both a realistic vision and accessible methods of sustainable living, I am thrilled to recommend *The Hero's Journey*, the third Nalanda Institute Contemplative Guide, to all who seek guidance from the wisdom of India and Tibet. The comprehensive system of contemplative living and learning introduced in this book and unfolded in the whole series holds enormous promise for helping us all develop the wellbeing, altruism and inspiration we need now more than ever. I am immensely proud of Dr. Joe Loizzo's synthesis, and absolutely delighted to welcome this masterful work of his into the light of today!

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## INTERPERSONAL NEUROBIOLOGICAL FOREWORD

We are all in great need of a new way of being—in ourselves, in our schools, and in our society. Our modern culture has evolved in recent times to create a troubled world with individuals suffering from alienation, schools failing to inspire and to connect with students; in short, we live in a contemporary society often devoid of a moral compass to help clarify how we can move forward in our global community to create a more meaningful, sustainable, and compassionate way of living. As a physician, psychiatrist, psychotherapist, scientist and educator, and as a father, husband, and son, I have been saddened and dismayed to find a firm grounding in the healthy mind absent even from our professional education and our work. After surveying over one hundred thousand mental health clinicians and nearly ten thousand teachers, the results are in that over ninety five percent of these professionals focusing on helping others develop the mind have never been offered a working definition of what the mind is!

In the field in which I work called “interpersonal neurobiology,” we combine over a dozen branches of science to address the question of what a working definition of the mind might be, and then on what a healthy mind is. Part of that journey of finding the universal principles across scientific disciplines has led us to explore the mechanisms of strengthening our mental skills through the attentional training of ancient meditative practices. One of these traditions comes from what is sometimes considered a “religion” but at other times is seen

as a form of practical “mind science,” the contemplative tradition of Buddhism. One facet of Buddhist meditation is the cultivation of a quality of attention that enhances the ability to be aware of present moment experience and free oneself from the burden of often self-created anxiety, despair, and isolation. In many ways, learning to train the mind to become more mindful has been demonstrated in a range of scientific studies to enhance immune function, improve cardiovascular health, increase the enzyme that maintains the ends of chromosomes (telomerase), balance emotions, decrease fear and anxiety, increase empathy and even strengthen self-compassion. Being mindfully aware, attending to the richness of here-and-now experiences, creates scientifically recognized enhancements in our physiology, our mental functions, and in our interpersonal relationships. Being fully present in our awareness opens our lives to new possibilities of well-being. In addition, what is called “interpersonal attunement,” focusing attention on the internal world of another, harnesses neural circuitry that enables two people to “feel felt” by one another, promoting longevity and resilience. Mindfulness may in fact be a form of “internal attunement” in which an observing self-function approaches a more directly experiencing self with curiosity, openness, acceptance, and love. This internal attunement may lead the brain to grow in ways that promote balanced self-regulation via the process of neural integration, which enables flexibility and self-understanding, empathy and compassion.

Almost all cultures have practices that help people develop awareness of the moment and what we can see enables attunement toward self and others. Each of the major religions of the world utilizes some method to enable individuals to focus their attention and feel connected to their inner and outer worlds, from meditation to prayer, yoga to *tai'chi*. Among these cultures, the Buddhist traditions of Asia have received growing attention from researchers and clinicians in recent years, in part because they approach our human needs for reflection and attunement as a science and healing art of individual and communal well-being. "The Buddha" was a man who sought a new way of living free from the self-created suffering that drove him to explore his inner world. The realization of a way to view suffering as inherent in the human condition and to outline the path to alleviate that suffering is the "awakening" that came with his journey. "Buddha" means the awakened one, and this awakening, this shedding light on a universal human condition, is the essence of Buddhist philosophy and practice.

After the Buddha's death, his followers ultimately travelled throughout Asia, and the various permutations of this original teaching have taken the form of specific traditions. The Theravada Buddhist tradition of South Asia has been enormously influential in the world, especially the West, offering time-tested methods of teaching and practicing mindfulness and loving-kindness, which have been increasingly integrated into a range of mindfulness- and acceptance-based approaches to psychotherapy. The Mahayana Buddhism of

East and Southeast Asia, though less influential in the West, has also made itself felt in the form of the Zen-inspired methodology of Marsha Linehan's Dialectical Behavior Therapy, as well as in the work of psychoanalysts like Jeremy Safran and Jeffery Rubin. Of all Buddhist traditions, the Vajrayana Buddhism of Central Asia, newest on the scene, is only now coming to our awareness through dialogues between Western researchers and the Dalai Lama, as well as through laboratory studies of expert Tibetan meditators by Herbert Benson, Richard Davidson and others.

Now we come to the book you hold in your hands: *Happy Interdependence*. This is the third volume in a systematic series covering the rich contemplative science of Tibetan Buddhism, as seen from the perspective of its potential contributions to popular psychology, psychotherapy and neuroscience. This volume and series make clear that Tibet, through its long isolation, has preserved the most comprehensive of Buddhist psychological traditions. We learn in this book that its comprehensive approach moves beyond the basic science of mindfulness, to add an advanced system of building attunement specifically meant for people seeking to live more contemplative lives in the everyday world. While there are many overlaps, naturally, with other Buddhist teachings, this approach reveals an intricate exploration of mind that illuminates layers of what our mental lives are like and what we can do to explore, expand, and cultivate them to promote well-being.

Beyond offering unique ways of teaching and practicing mindfulness to lay people in our active lives, this tradition also offers a system of social emotional self-regulation like loving kindness and Zen, but tailored for facing stressful social relationships and building social leadership outside the monastery. These techniques are less familiar than mindfulness in the West, though they seem to hold enormous potential to help busy people make quicker, more profound changes in perceptions of self and other, emotional regulation and visceral response style.

The key is that the way we learn to focus our attention, in this case using imagery, affirmations and breath control, can prime new neural patterns of activation and ultimately stimulate the growth of new synaptic connections in the brain itself. This is how we use the focus of attention with awareness—a function of the mind—to change the structure of the brain. Such tools of training attention may be especially helpful in bringing mindfulness and attunement to high performance social roles and intimate relationships. In many ways, these are “mindsight skills” that enable us to see our own and others’ minds with more clarity and depth, and then to transform this energy and information flow in our bodies and in our relationships toward a process called integration—the linkage of differentiated parts of a system. Modern science can be interpreted to suggest that physiological, interpersonal, and psychological health emerge from such integration, experienced as harmony and flexibility. Ancient contemplative practices may reveal a rigorous form of

mental training that ultimately can be seen to promote such integrative states in body, mind, and relationships.

Tibet's comprehensive approach to contemplative science, called the gradual path or gradual curriculum, is ably presented by Dr. Joe Loizzo, who is a Tibetan Buddhist scholar, an integrative psychiatrist and a contemplative psychotherapist all rolled into one deeply thoughtful and integrative practitioner. Dr. Loizzo is uniquely qualified to present the Tibetan approach to the emerging field of contemplative science, explaining its links with current stress research, psychotherapy and neuroscience, as well as its potential contributions to public health and well-being, interpersonal relationships, and even the well-being of our global community. Linking the Tibetan psychology of social engagement to current evolutionary models of altruism, he explores how this ancient view is consistent with emerging scientific discoveries for the role of the prefrontal cortex in the development of empathy, social attunement and higher neural integration.

Throughout *The Hero's Journey*, Dr. Loizzo balances traditional teachings on the third great Buddhist psychological systems or "vehicles" of contemplative life with reference to cutting edge science and a range of approaches to modern psychotherapy. The book explores more than meditation, diving deeply into the complementary disciplines of cognitive self-analysis and affective-behavioral transformation. The result of this carefully constructed scholarly journey is an unusual confluence of both a traditional and a contemporary



science of mind that offers a glimpse into the enormous potential and promise of the ongoing dialogue and cross-fertilization between these two very distinct disciplines of discovery.

Given the challenges we face throughout our global community in cultivating well-being in this troubled and alienated world, it is vital to our future well-being, and even our very existence, that we preserve and explore all human strategies to strengthen self-regulation and promote the internal and interpersonal integration needed to help us build our natural capacities for deep self-awareness and interpersonal attunement. Integration can ultimately shift the pathway of cultural evolution in a positive direction—and a strengthened capacity for mindful awareness may be the essential starting place to cultivate such an intentional shift, helping our increasingly interconnected and rapidly changing world to survive and even thrive as we move into this new digital era.

Science brings knowledge and technology but not necessarily wisdom. If we take our human family's accomplishments in exploring the nature of our mental lives, it is natural to then seek a weaving of the important contributions of all the sciences with the deep understanding of our subjective mental lives in the wisdom traditions of contemplation. Among the methods available to us today, the comprehensive curriculum preserved in the contemplative discipline of Tibet holds great promise for us all, both because it can be tailored to life in the everyday world and because it offers a wide range of attention training

tools of the mind that expand and deepen our capacity for empathic attunement and proactive social engagement. Such moral living does not arise from a vacuum, but can be cultivated with integrative practices. Integration is the source of well-being and health that provides a secular ethic around which we can focus our efforts to bring the world to a scientifically grounded place of positive growth. Integration made visible is kindness and compassion. Whether we come to such integrative practices as individuals seeking lasting happiness through caring relationships in the world, or as professionals seeking to heal, teach or lead, the insights and methods introduced in *The Hero's Journey* can inspire us all and offer vitally relevant strategies to all walks of humanity, and to the future of the world, this fragile and precious Earth, the home we all share.

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This second book in the series of Nalanda Contemplative Guides is the fruit of a journey that dates back to my childhood. As the son of an existential psychiatrist and a Sicilian-born history teacher, I grew up facing the challenges of our fragmented culture in my own home. While my father was drawn away from his Catholic roots towards modern science and psychotherapy, my mother stayed true to her mix of old world spirituality and progressive Catholicism. As I watched him grow more stressed and burdened, and her grow more calm and serene, I felt I was witnessing first hand a morality tale on the costs of cutting our ties with contemplative culture, and the benefits of preserving them. I vowed I'd only follow in my dad's footsteps if I could find a way to integrate contemplative insights and methods into modern medicine and psychotherapy.

As a religion and philosophy major at Amherst, I was fortunate enough to encounter the Tibetan Buddhist contemplative tradition, in the person and through the genius of Robert Thurman. More scientific than Western religions, but more contemplative than conventional psychotherapy, the psychology of Buddhism seemed to offer a middle way between the divergent paths I saw fragmenting my family and the world around me. Although resonant with the many contemplative cultures of our world—from the ancient traditions of Socrates, Ezekiel, and Confucius, to the medieval traditions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—Buddhist psychology was not only better documented and preserved but also more scientifically framed than its sister traditions.

After my college years delving into Indian and Tibetan philosophy, I embarked on a journey that would take me from NYU medical school and psychiatry training at Harvard, to studying in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in India and completing a PhD. with Thurman in Buddhist Studies at Columbia. From meeting Bob as a freshman in 1973 until today, the journey took four decades, and only really came to fruition in the last twelve years. Though I immersed myself throughout in working to reconcile and integrate two complementary traditions of healing and psychology, the final integration of all my learning and reflection only ripened when I had the chance to found the Center for Meditation and Healing at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital and open a private practice in contemplative psychotherapy in Manhattan.

It wasn't something in me that changed, but rather the world that had changed around me. After decades of following my journey with little or no understanding from my professors and peers, little by little a new field began taking shape. Colleagues I'd crossed paths with or had only heard of—Mark Epstein and Dan Goleman, Sharon Salzberg and Chris Germer, Jon Kabat-Zinn and John Teasdale, Richie Davidson and Dan Siegel—began to create the new field that each of us had envisioned but hardly dreamed possible. After developing and testing versions of mindfulness-based stress-reduction and mindfulness-based psychotherapy informed by the comprehensive mind science of the Tibetan tradition, I founded the Nalanda Institute for

Contemplative Science to make these accessible to inquiring lay students and professional caregivers alike.

The Institute is inspired by the Buddhist monastic University of Nalanda in North India, which flourished from the time of Nagarjuna (c. 150 CE) to its destruction in the mid-thirteenth century. The world's first residential university, there are many reasons why Nalanda has left a global legacy of relevance to us all. For our purposes two of these stand out. Nalanda specialized in developing, refining, and spreading the scientific traditions of Buddhist culture, offering a non-violent, contemplative version of human science and civilization that had a lasting international impact on cultures throughout Asia. In addition, it specialized in developing a systematic approach to teaching contemplative living in the everyday world, tailored to lay students and mainstream communities rather than simply to cloistered monks and nuns.

At the heart of Nalanda Institute are the comprehensive curriculum of the gradual path, and the integrative method of combining group classes with individual counseling and mentoring. These two aspects of contemplative learning come together in Nalanda's core programs: the Four Year Program in Sustainable Happiness for lay students; and the two-year Certificate Program in Contemplative Psychotherapy for professionals. Each of these surveys four great horizons of the gradual path—the basic science of self-healing, the socially engaged practice of compassionate openness, the transformational arts of role-modeling imagery and narrative, and the mind/body techniques of smart vagal

breathing and blissful flow states—and each complements that learning journey with counseling, mentoring, and supervision, following the Nalanda teaching tradition preserved to this day in Tibetan monastic colleges and universities.

As a definitive reference text for these complete programs in contemplative learning and practice, I published *Sustainable Happiness: The Mind Science of Well-Being, Altruism, Inspiration* in the Routledge Behavioral Science series in 2012. Given the extensive nature and hybrid format of the Nalanda curriculum, many have asked me for a modular series, written in the conversational style and tone of my teaching and psychotherapy practice. This book is part of a series that does just that, based on transcriptions of live classes taught within the Nalanda Four Year Program offered at Tibet House US in New York.

We call the course on which this book is based “The Hero’s Journey,” although it focuses on the positive psychology of creative vision and pure passion in Buddhism. One reason for this is that this Buddhist science is not just representative of other meditative approaches to imagination, sublimation, and altruism, but also among the most rigorously framed and best-preserved systems of its kind. The other main reason why the Buddhist contemplative psychology of love and compassion in particular is well placed to serve as representative of its class is that it shares many basic principles and practices with modern psychotherapy and neuropsychology. As I mention in the introduction to *Sustainable Happiness*, Buddhist psychology shares three key assumptions with

Freud's new science of psychoanalysis and art of psychotherapy. Both traditions begin with the assumption of a mental causality, in which the mind's intentional activity is recognized as causally effective, and as a primary determinant of human development. Second, both take a broadly evolutionary approach to the mind, in that they see the causal workings of our minds as embedded in a multi-life continuum and in the interplay of inheritance and development, nature and nurture. Third and lastly, given their causal view of mental life as a function of mental activity, and given their view of mental activity as shaped by heredity and childhood, they both adopt as a primary method of shifting the course of our inner lives an intimate social learning relationship which amounts to a kind of re-parenting.

Of course, there are major distinctions between these two far-flung traditions of psychology, but I invite those who may want to explore those differences further to read the introduction to *Sustainable Happiness*, available online. For now, I simply want to point to the family resemblances that make Buddhist psychology a crucial intermediary in any dialogue between humanity's ancient contemplative traditions and modern psychology.

The second main factor that makes the Buddhist psychology of love and compassion a viable representative of humanity's many forms of spiritual psychology in our day and age is that it also anticipated some of the key insights and findings of contemporary neuroscience. Like modern neuropsychology, Buddhist psychology sees the individual mind or

consciousness less as a unitary entity or eternal soul than as part of a multi-life continuum and social field of co-evolving, interdependent minds and lives. Likewise, it sees mind not as disembodied but as always causally interdependent and interactive with subtle physical elements, including energies called winds, airs or breaths, chemical elements called drops, and microscopic structural elements called channels and complexes. In light of Buddhist psychology, today's great discovery of neural plasticity—that nerve cells and their electrochemical networks constantly grow and change in response to attention and mental activity—is not news at all, but a basic assumption that explains how active development, mindful self-healing and deep transformation work. And the great discovery of the latest psychology of creative integration—that the human mind and brain evolved, develop, and thrive based on positive vision and passion—is not news either, but a basic assumption that explains why turning childhood self-images and narratives of fear, anger, and shame into heroic visions of a better self, world, and life journey forms the ground and fuel of creative human development and sociocultural transformation.

The introduction to psychology that follows combines several topics that are often taught separately in traditional curricula, to give an overview of the field. First, it reviews the basic foundations of Buddhist contemplative psychology as a path of assisted self-healing and mindful self-transformation, comparable in some ways to modern psychotherapy. Then it focuses on Buddhist transformational psychology as a practice of consciously reconstructing self and



life in which each student-practitioner learns to replicate the Buddha's journey of self-transformation, by transforming familiar, reactive constructs of self and life into an ideal, heroic vision of self and life based on identifying with empowering role-models and their heroic life narrative. Though traditionally, this path involves identifying role-models, committing to heroic ideals, and re-envisioning one's self-image and life narrative in the mirror of those shared ideals, this course presents this rare art as harnessing a natural process of self-creation, in line with the modern psychotherapeutic arts of self-psychology, Jungian analysis and narrative therapy.

This rare art—integrating the core disciplines of mentoring, role-modeling imagery, and heroic living that date back to the first millennium of the common era—is traditionally attributed to the founders of the Nalanda tradition, Nagarjuna, Aryadeva, and Chandrakirti, although Western scholars question this attribution. It was transmitted to Tibet by Nalanda masters Padmasambhava (732-804), Naropa (978-1026) and Atisha (982-1054), among others. According to tradition, this system was integrated into the step-by-step teachings of the gradual path (Tib. *Lam-rim*), because its empowering, multi-modal approach would make them more accessible to lay students, especially in non-Buddhist countries like Tibet. I believe this strategy—of integrating the essential insights and skills of the gradual path into a therapeutic system of intimate mentor bonding—is also well suited to lay students in the non-Buddhist West. We present this integrated path of “creative-poetic process” (Skt. Vajra-mantra-tantra-

yana) in the formats most widely known and practiced in Tibetan medicine and psychology, the *Seven Step Role-Modeling Practice (Saptangapuja)* of the *Healing Mentor (Bhaishajyaguru)*, *Healing Mother (Arya Tara)*, *Sheer Brilliance (Manjushri)* and *Wisdom Mother (Prajnaparamita)*.

As for the story behind *The Hero's Journey*, I'd like to acknowledge the kindness of the many individuals whose encouragement and help have made this book and series possible. First, I'd like to thank Bob Thurman for his lifelong friendship and example, and for his support of our fruitful collaboration with Tibet House US. I also am deeply indebted to the exemplary wisdom and kindness of Bob's Tibetan mentors, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Ganden Tripa Kyabje Lingsang Rinpoche, Tshanshab Serkong Rinpoche, Kyabje Gelek Rinpoche, and Doctor Yeshe Donden. I am deeply grateful for frequent opportunities to dialogue with His Holiness on topics from Buddhist psychology to modern neuroscience, Tibetan medicine to quantum physics, as well as for his teachings on the *Wheel of Time*, the art of mentoring, the wisdom of emptiness, and the history of Nalanda. I am forever indebted to his senior tutor, the Venerable Ling Rinpoche, for embodying the profound healing wisdom of Nagarjuna. I feel enormous affection for Gelek Rinpoche, who embodies for me the positive mind science and art of Asanga and Shantideva. I'm also truly grateful to Yeshe Donden, for grounding me in the science of Buddhist medicine, Lama Anagarika Govinda, for guiding me through the labyrinth of Buddhist psychology, and to Masatoshi Nagatomi and Geshe Losang Jamspal, for

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realm of deep transformational affect work thanks to my time with the gifted affect theorist and couples therapist, my dear friend Robert Rosenthal.

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Of course, if despite the guidance and help of all my mentors and friends, there remain any errors or omissions, I take full responsibility for them. May my kind mentors, inseparable from *Sheer Brilliance*, protect me! And may any merit or intuition that comes of writing and offering *The Hero's Journey* help open the eyes and melt the hearts of all beings through the furthest reaches of space and time.

September 26, 2015

The Cliff Haven

Riverside Drive

Manhattan, New York

## Chapter One

### Imprints, Imagoes & Gods: The Alchemy of Self-Transformation

Welcome to the third year of the Nalanda Institute Four-Year Program in Sustainable Happiness. Some of you have been on this journey for a couple of years already. Those of you who are here for the first time, you don't have to feel like you're missing something, because in the Tibetan tradition it is perfectly natural and very common to enter this type of program at a number of different points. Here's a brief orientation.

Although this a core program of the Nalanda Institute, it is generally taught at Tibet House. We are communal institutions and we overlap to share a tradition that originally developed for monastics and for spiritual professionals. Then it was increasingly retooled and refocused to make it accessible to people living in the world, people that were looking for a way to transform their lives. You can transform by dropping out of the world, if you choose to do that, but you can transform also by staying engaged in the world and society, provided that you get the extra tools that you need to protect your self against engaging in social stress and re-engaging through trauma.

In the first year of the program we talked about mindfulness and how it allows us to stop the cycle of stress and trauma, and to arrive at a place of awareness, presence, inner peace, and the possibility that we can live in that

peace rather than in the poisoned energy of evolution -- which is more like a survival of neuroses from trauma.

In the second year we focused on *lojong*, Tibetan *mind training*, or *mind transforming* as I like to call it. This training is intense; and the practices, which include *loving-kindness*, are powerful. We Westerners can appreciate that, we can use that extra power, because we are living a lifestyle that generates industrial-strength stress; so it is good to have the most powerful tools that we can get. This is a very common place to enter the teachings in the Tibetan curriculum. If you go to a Tibetan Dharma Center or you walk into a monastery you can walk into any one of those mind-transforming classes.

Now as we begin the third year, we turn to the more accelerated forms of social engagement. How do we engage with the crazy world that we live in, so that we can manage and grow with the industrial strength stresses and all the information noise that they produce? Within the Tibetan teaching tradition it is common to enter the study of this curriculum at this point, this level. In our case you might walk into a class, for example, in the Spring, when one of my old and dearest Tibetan teachers, Gelek Rinpoche, will be teaching those of you who want the traditional experience, the personal connection to these practices. He will give us a teaching on the Healing Mentor, or the Medicine Buddha as some people like to call him; and another teaching on White Tara, the Healing Mother. These are two visualization practices that are very commonly taught by Tibetan doctors to ordinary people, people who are struggling with anxiety or

with health conditions such as cancer and other kinds of illness. Some of us at Nalanda Institute have taught these practices in hospitals, mostly to women with breast cancer, and also to patients with heart disease, anxiety, depression, and a whole range of other afflictions. We are continuing this type of teaching and we are studying the benefits of these practices.

The practices of the Medicine Buddha and White Tara are designed to be accessible, they are entry-level, introductory practices, so you do not have to feel that if you have entered the program in year three that you have to go back to year one; it is fine to enter this way. Still, as you will see after we talk today about what is involved in an effective tantric practice, you may at some point want to go back and fill in the foundation with the preliminaries. This will allow you to more fully integrate the practice and get the maximum benefit out of it. These two gentle introductory forms of tantric practice have built into them many of the elements of the early practices we went through. You can also use them as stand-alone practices. I know a lot of people who do that, and it is a perfectly sensible way to practice. Other people prefer to include an active meditative practice of imagery, so we will talk about that too.

Let me say a few words about the syllabus. "Sustainable Happiness" is included as the main reference for this course; the material is presented in the same language, tone and four-part structure that I use for this program. It brings together the scientific, healing and psychological version of Buddhist culture,



what has always been Buddhism's essence, the active ingredient under the hood, so-to-speak. The fact is that even though Buddhist culture has taken many forms and has made itself accessible in many different ways, in different countries and at different times, it has always been *most* committed to a scientific understanding of suffering and happiness, and to providing reproducible tools for healing. I see a lot of heads shaking in the room, so I am going to assume I don't need to go further on this.

I have recommended a few other books for this course. If you want something more traditional, or a more poetic introduction to the same territory, I suggest Lama Yeshe's wonderful book, "Introduction to Tantra." Lama Yeshe has a beautiful energy. I wish he were still with us. He has this beautiful energy that makes you want to sit down and practice. He is not at all intimidating or foreboding, like my long sentences in "Sustainable Happiness", for which I apologize; I tried my best to keep it simple, but this material can easily get too complicated. In Lama Yeshe's case he really had that experience, he lived it -- and his writing reflects that.

Mark Epstein's book "Open to Desire: The Truth About What The Buddha Taught" is also very good; it provides another point of view of the tantric approach and psychotherapy. Tashi Tsering's book "Tantra" is very much like parts three and four of my book, as we both follow fairly traditional formats. And Bob Thurman's "Jewel Tree of Tibet" is lovely, it is more practice-oriented and it

focuses on a specific kind of visualization that is very much a startup for Tibetan tantra, it's a transitional practice for people who are starting on tantric techniques.

I have translated *tantra* as 'process' -- a dubious translation, like all other translations. I will try give you a flavor for what I mean. Because tantra is a contemplative practice that was shrouded in secrecy and encoded symbolically, and because it uses provocative practices and provocative imagery, and for a variety of other reasons, tantra is very easily misunderstood. Let me start as Tsong Khapa starts in chapter 7 of his "Diamond Pavilion Process", to introduce his most concise discussion of what tantra is and what tantra isn't.

*"If emptiness were the technique, there would be no (complete) enlightenment. No fruit is of a genus different from its seed, so emptiness cannot be the art (of embodiment). Victors teach emptiness to vanquish the self (reifying) constructs of those who insist on their view of (personal) self and those who reject the view (that Impersonal things also lack self). Hence, it is (envisioning) the sphere of a perfected world [a mandala] which binds the blissful art. Through union with the dignity of an enlightened being, enlightenment will not be far. The Teacher was endowed with the thirty-two signs and eighty-four marks (of altruistic embodiment). Therefore, the technique is to assume (the form of) success, which is the Teacher's form itself."*

This paragraph unpacks beautifully the key points that distinguish tantra from other kinds of Buddhist practices, and it also helps us distinguish what tantra is and isn't. We start with what tantra isn't, with the misconceptions, because they abound.

I lived in California for a number of years, and here and there I saw ads for things like "Chakra Alignment, Tantric Sex workshops." Tantra is everywhere (but maybe it's really nowhere ...) As a result tantra and the techniques that came along with it have been widely spread as "quick methods" of reaching some intense passionate enlightenment. So about 20 years ago, the Dalai Lama reversed his long-standing position on keeping tantra silent versus making it more available. He saw that with all the misinformation that kept proliferating, it was better to open it up, and to start publishing qualified works on tantra. Something had to be done so that people who were interested in tantra as a practice for spiritual development would be able to tell the difference between hype and the real thing.

I remember when I first met Bob Thurman, back in the seventies. He had finished a work that became his great work on Tibetan philosophy, Tsong Khapa's philosophy; he then started on a work by Nagarjuna, where he talks about tantra. I have cribbed many very juicy quotes from that text. At that time the Dalai Lama was saying, "No, you can't publish that." Then, in 2011, when I

started writing "Sustainable Happiness" I went to see Bob; and he handed me a copy of the book that he had just published, on tantra, just as I was getting ready to write the tantric chapters. The book is published by Columbia University Press, and its full name is "Brilliant Illumination of The Lamp of The Five Stages: Practical Instructions in The King of Tantras, The Glorious Esoteric Community." There is something about the karma of these things, how they happen together, it is something that I feel personally.

There are many misconceptions of what tantra is and what it is not. Here are three statements that are present out there, circulating, and that are about what tantra is. One is that tantra is for consumerists, for people who, like many Americans and many New Yorkers, are so full of desire that they can't sit and meditate. For them, they have to have a path that harnesses desire, and that is the tantric path. Two, tantra taps into bliss states; these are deep, profound states of bliss that make enlightenment quicker. Three, tantra is the only kind of Buddhist practice that uses the internal system of chakras and channels that we have learned from yoga, with three channels in the center, referred to as our *subtle body*.

Tantra does have these three qualities. Tantra is a way of harnessing passions; Tsong Khapa does not deny that tantra works by burning the fuel that it is supposed to transform into compassion, through a meditative form of alchemy. He does not deny that tantra taps into bliss states and that tantra uses

the chakra system. But he says that none of these is the essential component, the characteristic that makes tantra distinctive and unique as a practice. In fact, all good contemplative practice is about harnessing and transforming our human passions, that is what it is all about, about learning to disarm all the destructive emotions inside of us and develop a taste for tapping into pure, positive emotions. This is what you can get with Sharon Salzberg's book, "Loving-kindness" and its practice, that's what it's all about, it's purification in the traditional sense.

All good meditative practice taps into bliss. Samadhi, concentration, deep concentration, deep states of mindfulness that verge into absorption or immersion, they all have a bliss quality to their experience, and we may taste a little bit of that bliss when we meditate. And then it's like our day is just a little bit better. And if we keep going deeper and deeper, in this way, even without the tantras, we reach deeper and deeper, and in this way we gain access to more blissful states, states that are available naturally within our minds, right here, right now. But while it is true of all contemplative practice that blissful states can come up in any of them, the tantras work more quickly, and they use a different methodology.

There are four levels of tantra practice. The lower tantras, like the Medicine Buddha and the normal White Tara, are meditative aids designed to inform our imagination; with them we can call up an encounter with some sort of enlightenment that we can recognize in a human form, and we can have a

personal relationship with that enlightenment. Here we don't use the chakra system, so that cannot be what makes tantra distinctive from other practices. So, what is it? Tsong Khapa proposes three reasons that make tantra special.

The first is that tantra is quick, it's the fast track to enlightenment, because it's a meditation system that is sort of multi-dimensional or multi-tasking, in the sense that you practice two kinds of meditation at the same time. This is different from other meditative practices, including other Asian Buddhist practices. For example, in Theravada, some of the time you are practicing mindfulness and some of the time you are practicing Vipassana, or insight; you practice only one at a time. The same goes for loving-kindness practice, to develop positive emotions that stabilize your mind and relationships with people. And so it is for mind transforming, or *lojong*. We meditate on emptiness to clear our mind of our neurotic self, to dismantle and dissolve our neurotic self so that we can find radical openness within us -- and then we can tap into our amazing learning and changing minds, to the essence of our nature. Then there is another type of meditation practice to help us develop equanimity, like giving-and-taking. In every case, in each of these practices, you have to do the two practices, developing the wisdom of emptiness, or openness, and developing compassion, separately; and you bring them together at a later stage. The process looks something like this: first you have to practice openness, you have to open your mind and get rid of all the neurotic stress instincts and traumas; clear your mind of that garbage. Then comes the illusion-like practice for

strengthening your compassionate nature and for embodying a compassionate body, for getting used to having a more compassionate body, a more compassionate heart. But this is a slower path: you start with development in two parts and then you have to bring them together, much later, and only then there is sort of a startup. In this kind of practice you are not taking advantage of synergy, you are not taking advantage of the fact that compassion can help you understand openness, or emptiness; and emptiness can help you feel and develop constructive compassion. And so you will have to wait longer for the benefit.

Here's where we see the power of tantra. You use imagery both on the compassion side, to call up emotional qualities, emotional human perceptual qualities; and you also use imagery, images of openness or space, to practice opening your mind, purging and freeing your mind. For example, in the very brief meditation we did at the beginning of today's session, we imagined the whole universe and then melted it into emptiness. Fundamentally this is done for purging our nervous system, it's like shutting the computer down, to get all that garbage perception of the world to stop. This is a very simple, rudimentary notion of openness, to help clear your mind, even if just for a minute, of the images that are constantly filling it. Then we practiced developing a more personal relationship with our own self as a lighter, clearer kind of a being; we did this when we meditated on our body as that body of light, shaped like a wave of energy, connecting that wave with the Buddha and his pure-energy

way of being, his purely compassionate and liberated way of being that emphasizes the compassionate nature. This is all one meditation, intended to develop openness and compassion together, at the same time. As you will see later, we will assemble openness and compassion, we will realize them separately in one meditation and then we will assemble them in the same meditation. This is a multi-tasking form of practice that allows us to grow on multiple levels simultaneously.

By using imagery you are communicating to the newer part of your mind, the 85 or 95 percent of your mind that did not start to evolve until two million years ago; because language is only a few million years old. And the same goes for that higher waking consciousness the modern West has exalted as the real consciousness, but actually that is just riding on the surface. As Freud said about it, that consciousness is not a master in its own house. That ego-like waking consciousness is in fact being pushed around by the animals underneath our skin, the animal spirits and the animal dreams, dream time, the dream life that lies underneath – "We are such stuff as dreams are made on" as Prospero says in Shakespeare's *Tempest*. So, by using imagery at the beginning and then bringing it together with analytic meditation we can get to talk to the animal inside of us, we can tell some stories to the inner wild animal and the inner child that we are inside, we do that as we try to civilize our inner self, because by telling it stories, by using this art, we can transform them both. This is part of what makes this a very powerful practice -- and why some people like it.



An issue we have to address that is important about technique is that as we become "normal adults" we stop using our imagination to a large extent, so our imagery skills are impaired. In fact, our capacity to vividly imagine things at will has been atrophying since childhood. That is unless we are professional artists, or we engage in make-believe when we do some story-telling and play with our children. I can see it in my children, their imagination, they can use it so easily, they can build a world all by themselves, they can have Star Trek, Star Wars and Ninja Wars all at the same time; just like that! And then they are not listening to mom and dad. They don't live in the same reality we do. They don't care if they get to school. And they are right, why should they, they are having fun! As for us adults, we learned to shut down all possibilities, all variety of perceptions of the world except for one, we focus on one perception of the world, only one, and then we think that that perception is the "real" world ... But actually that world is only a shared interactive fantasy. The key thing here for most of us, as we start to reboot our imagination as a creative process, is that it will be hard to have vivid imagery. Some people can do it more easily; but for most of us it's sort of like reading a book or a poem, you have the sense that it's there but you can't see it like you can see this shared reality. And that's fine. It is much more important that you have a sense that that reality is there, in your mind's eye. You are "suspending disbelief", as Coleridge said when describing our reaction to poetry or fiction. And as you do so you can, sort-of, feel that the

Buddha is there, sort of. That is more important than seeing his tuft of hair, or his third eye, or the extra scoop on his crown.

As we go forward with visualization practice, one of the signs of progress is that the visualizations become more vivid. But we need to go slowly. In my experience, and especially for us laypeople, we can't take the *macho* approach to this practice. We can't spend 14 hours a day seven days a week honing our visualization skills. We have to go with what works, with what is the story line and what is the emotional connection. And at some point there is a sense of presence of the being that we are calling up; that is because, as I will explain to you as we go along, we are not just calling up an image. The image is connected to a gut memory, or an emotional memory, of a real person. And that sense of presence of the real person is what matters, that's what's important, that we have a feeling like "I am really talking to my mentor, to His Holiness the Dalai Lama himself" or whoever your mentor is as a real live person. And that presence will lead us into the next thing ...

Let me tell you a little bit about the use of imagery. First of all, there are some amazing results coming out of current research on imagery. And it supports one of the things that Rodolfo Llinás, one of my neuroscience professors at NYU, used to talk about. In his book "The I of the Vortex: From Neurons to Cells" he explains his theory of how ego consciousness emerged out of the brain, how it developed neurally. He built a fascinating model of how the brain works

based on his experiments and discovery of an electrical circuit that springs from the basal ganglia. This is a pretty old part of our brain, of the reptilian part of our brain, that is shooting current through a wave that goes into our cortex once every 40<sup>th</sup> of a second. This wave lights up and connects the various cells and modules in our brain that are involved in creating our state of consciousness at every moment, moment by moment, all the time. It's like we are assembling a film and every 40<sup>th</sup> of a second we get a new frame, and the frame may have on it a bunch of little points that are part of the information network. Brain cells are always busy, all the time, doing this or doing that. They are all linked up in a single electrical wave that gives them cohesion, and then that wave gets altered every 40<sup>th</sup> of a second, by taking input from the sensory world or from our imagination, or from our memory if we are dreaming. The same process that allows us to dream also allows us to perceive the waking world. The only difference is that every 40<sup>th</sup> of a second, when we are awake, we take in a few bites of information from our senses, from our sensory world, like I might notice, "Oh, you smiled..." I might notice that little bit, and try to respond to it, based on my perception of what's happening in the world around me, out there. Still, what is happening during most of that 40<sup>th</sup> of a second is internally generated, in my mind somewhere, it might as well be a projector that projects my own mental content on the world. That is why the dream state and the waking state are much less different than Descartes would have us believe when he said "I think therefore I am", they are much less different than modern enlightenment

philosophy would have us believe; because in reality we, all together, are *really* having an interactive dream.

Why is that important? It is important because supposing we've never really thought about our interactive dream, a dream that is the result of some awful dark years of childhood, maybe, and hopefully it has also some wonderful trips to the mountains or something. Then there is school and our socialization and acculturated, partial and biased information that is presented to us as The Truth. Add to that all the role modeling we got from our neurotic parents, our neurotic teachers and our neurotic community, not to mention all the junk that the media funnels into our poor little imagination -- that is the software that we are running on! So, it is a bit of a nightmare. And, what that does is it filters all the information from out there, from our external to our internal world, through a nightmare filter. It exaggerates. And so we perceive our self as a small helpless alienated and frightened child in a big crazy world, full of all kinds of dangers and disasters that we can't affect in any positive way, clearly we are walking into a world that is a horror story. No wonder it feels horrible...

Then, at the end of the day, or week, of living in that world you go to a movie, and you park your imagination by the door, and let somebody else transplant a new imagination into you. If it's a romantic comedy, rather than an action thriller, you come out happy, cheerful and optimistic. Your blood pressure is down and your whole nervous system feels completely different. You feel and

you are much friendlier, just like when you take a nice long vacation. Yet nothing happened, you did not go anywhere, it's all in your imagination. And *that* is the awesome power of our imagination.

There is much imagery research going on, by people like Robert Kuzendorf at the University of Massachusetts. A couple of studies show that vivid imagery has the power to override our perception -- not just filter, but override! There was a study on color perception, in which individuals were first asked to imagine the color green; then a spectroscope shot red light at them. After that their retinas were examined, and measures were taken of which rods and cones were lighting up. The results included a statistically significant number of individuals that perceived green. When these individuals were asked what color they saw, they confirmed they saw green, not red. This is interesting; but maybe it should not so surprising: that a significant number of them, probably the better visualizers among them, saw what they imagined, not what they saw through their eyes.

And so that is the power of the mind, the power to shape our neural activity. It is enormous, and so it can be enormously helpful.

A good friend of mine, Bill Bushell, who is an anthropologist of contemplative states, told me about a study of the use of vivid imagery for healing wounds. This is like traditional Tibetan tantra. Tibetans use tantra not just for spirituality but also for medicine; they use it for cancer, they use it for

infection, they use it for everything. So, if you are in the mountains meditating and you get an infection, you can meditate on a flame, imagine a flame in your body, where the infection is, and see what happens. People who meditate on a flame in their finger discover that it's not just their mind flexing its muscles around, they find that the temperature in their finger goes up significantly, the blood flow in the finger also goes up significantly, and the immune function improves enough to be equal to the impact of an antibiotic.

And so through imagery our mind has this amazing power to modulate our nervous system; and our body believes what our mind tells it. This is the reason why if our mind is living in a nightmare our body is in big trouble; our body and our life are in big trouble when they are being run by a frightened animal and/or a traumatized child who believe that they are small and powerless. This is what we go to psychotherapy for, this is what it's all about. But here, in this program, we are learning to use some power tools to change all that, with our mind -- and that is pretty amazing.

People are using imagery more and more. They are using it more as they understand the power of it, not just for short-term neurobiological feats or special achievements, but for learning, for modulating the learning process, for facilitating the learning process. Examples include flight simulators for pilots, astronauts and people who are navigating huge tankers; and athletes who use it to improve and learn new moves. They imagine their own self going through

the moves, and that primes their nervous system. We know now how this works, it works because of our brain's plasticity. That quality means that we have the energy in our imagination to set up an information wave in the brain, and that information wave then mobilizes energy and blood flow to specific neural circuits; those neural circuits start grafting connections to new neurons. And that is how you start building the neural infrastructure for doing something even though you are not actually doing anything. That is how flight simulators work, your brain is actually doing it even though your body is not.

This is how tantra works also; this is part of the reason why it is so powerful. But this is not the main reason why tantra is so amazing; we are not there yet. What is the most amazing thing that Tsong Khapa said was uniquely distinctive about tantra? The uniquely distinctive thing about tantra is that it is a goal-oriented practice; and this emphasis on results appeals to us as Americans. It is also associated to the notion of role-modeling imagery; it is what I like to call *active role-modeling*.

The essential thing about tantra practice is that instead of just learning either intellectually or practically from a book or an exercise, we learn the way we evolved to learn, naturally and holistically, that is from the perspective of the whole human being and the human species. What I mean is the way that the brain evolved over 60-70 million years in mammals, it allowed us to lose our fangs and claws and become such cute little helpless creatures. And the reason why

this could happen is because mommy was there to take care of us. And why was mommy there to take care of us? What was the point? How did that work? It worked, and it was possible because we had these amazing brains, these amazing *plastic* brains. At that time we didn't have a whole lot of genetic information to tell us what to do; we couldn't even walk on two feet. So we learned how to be in a way that was appropriate to the time and place, with mommy taking care of us. And that is what social learning is all about; that is what imprinting is all about. It is about using a soft information processing system, a learned information processing system to supplement genetic information processing, which can be made more modular and adaptable.

We can essentially download a software program from our parents, our caregivers, that tells us what parts of our genetic information we need to survive in this day and age, in this neighborhood and in this tribe. That is an amazing capacity. And that system has been working so well that our brains are getting bigger and bigger. Yet, at the same time, with less fangs and less claws we have become more and more helpless. Why? Because, the preservation of learned social information was much more important for our cooperation -- and therefore our survival -- than the preservation of genetic information. Our brain has proven to be a much more adaptable tool.

What if we decide to exploit, capitalize on this? Well, that is what Freud did when he invented psychotherapy. Psychotherapy is a re-education. We are educated first as children: we take it all in, we take in the bitter with the



better. What Freud came up with is that if we want to heal the damage that was done by learning some garbage from our parents and our childhood, we have to have another relationship, a loving relationship with another person who hopefully comes with less baggage in his system, who in therapy sits behind you so you don't see him and says as little as possible in order not to increase your own baggage.

The Tibetans and the Tantric Nalanda tradition in India developed a technique, better than psychotherapy, to reduce your baggage and improve your life. And that is through imagery. You use an image of a role model to filter out the unnecessary negative quirks and other useless personal information from your role model, and you focus on the essential qualities that you are trying to acquire. You might get some inspiration from looking at the Tibetan art when you go to the Rubin museum.

You might think that tantric practice is all just in your head. But no, that is not true. The way that Tibetan Tantric practice works is through your mentor, your teacher. You don't get permission to imagine any of the tantric deities unless you have a relationship with the teacher. What is important is not the image; what is important is the relationship with the teacher, the person who has qualities that you want, qualities that they have learned, perhaps through their own personal experience, or perhaps through a mentoring relationship with their teachers. And so you might say that, through your teacher, his teachers are mentoring you. The images are just a tool to help you filter through what they

have to teach you, and only that, in a way that you are protected from any useless information or any weaknesses that your teacher might still have.

According to Tsong Khapa, the purpose of this mentoring system is to capture and to capitalize on and to conserve the amazing human capital of learned spiritual and contemplative experience that has accumulated over time. This is very different from some contemplative traditions, where a practitioner might spend her whole life in a cave somewhere and die, and then that's it! No chance to pass on any knowledge, it all goes, her whole experience, everything she learned. Tibetan practice is very different in that respect, it is powerful and beautiful, and effectively conserved -- and it is to be shared.

Tibetan tantric practice is a technology, a very precise and sophisticated technology for amplifying personal experience and realization, essentially by turning practitioners into their own therapist, not only for their own self but also for thousands and thousands of other people, potentially, through mentoring relationships across generations. It is a very, very powerful technology, also elegant and simple. It's like an Internet, in the sense that there are many possible connections, but without computers, no need for the hardware, we just use our brain and our imagination.

Tsongkhapa said that, in practicing tantra, by envisioning "*the perfected world we bind the blissful art.*" We learn the art of staying happy in a crazy world by binding our imagination to a positive vision of the world, that's our flight

simulator for entering the world in a sane way, a way that protects us from the garbage; we filter it all out. Tsongkhapa adds: *'By practicing the dignity of an enlightened being enlightenment will not be far.'* What I have translated here as 'dignity' is often translated literally, as 'Buddha pride'. You might think pride is a bad thing; isn't it one of the seven sins? For Buddhists you should be proud if you are a Buddha. If you are a perfected being, if you are a being that has overcome your instincts for suffering, your traumatic childhood, you have learned how to be happy and communicate that happiness to others and to whole communities, you have much to be proud of. Any one of us that can get there should be very proud, you will have accomplished much to be proud of, in a positive way.

To be proud of our self in a positive way, first we have to overcome what is called *ordinary pride*. The pride of ordinariness comes out when I feel like, "Oh I am just neurotic little Joe, I am mommy's and daddy's neurotic little boy, golden boy." And ordinary pride is also the stuff from our culture, like "This is where I fit in my social system, this is my race, my gender, my cast, whatever ..." From the Buddhist point of view this is all suffering, and it limits our capacity to be hopeful, to reach our full potential, to be the best we can be, to become enlightened.

How do we undo all this baggage this is limiting our potential and our world? We undo it in the same way that we did it in the first place. We became who we are through mentoring and modeling from our parents, our teachers, and all the people who have influenced us, molded us. And so now we un-

become that and become someone better, by modeling our self in the image of enlightened beings that this time around we will choose. Tantra is the vehicle for doing this, it provides a most elegant and sophisticated course.

Tantra is not unique in using imagery and role modeling for learning, all spiritual traditions have something along these lines. Actually all learning works somewhat like this. That is why it is important to have a Buddha, or a Christ, or a Mohammed, because we all need a good model. But the learning works more effectively when you have got one live model in the room -- and that is the teacher, a teacher that is around at least some of the time, so you can check your imagination to make sure that you are more or less on track.

Another important point is that this tantra practice is not for those of us who are just looking for ways of becoming helpful and not hurting anybody. Here we are looking for a system to show each of us, "how do I transform, how do I become strong enough to not only make myself happy and protect myself, but also to be positively transforming to the world around me as I go -- and how do I do all that transforming as quickly as possible?" That's what we're going for, what we are trying to accomplish here. You can understand why we need some pride ...

Tantra's focus on goal orientation is key. And it is reflected in many ways. For example, in the quote from Tsongkhapa we heard before, he said that "*The teacher had the two and thirty marks and eight- four signs of being a fully*

*developed altruist.*" And so the Buddha had all the marks of embodying human kindness and humanity. The quickest way to get that body, the Buddha's body, the body of a fully developed altruist, is by assuming the Buddha's form, that is the teacher's form, which is a human form made of compassion. And the best way to live the life with such compassion, the life of a spiritual being in a crazy, contaminated stress-driven world, is to buy into the notion of *activism of wise compassion, or fierce compassion*. This program goes over the fast track for that. With the practices we are learning here you don't build your compassion slowly over eons of positive actions, slowly becoming more and more altruistic, with a little more altruism here and there, a little more happiness, like dropping off used clothes in Rockaway for the needy. In this practice you imagine instead clothing the whole world, and transforming it all. And you become the person that naturally wants to do that, you want to do that with everyone you meet, wherever you are.

Goal orientation speeds up the learning process. If you can imagine where you want to get and work backwards from that, you get there faster. But to succeed you really need a good model. I can relate to that, from medical school. You go to medical school, you do a bunch of things that have nothing to do with being a doctor; you take tests, you look at dead bodies, ... you do all this stuff that, in my view, as an anthropological observer, this training system is designed to make you think that you know everything. I suppose that kind of

confidence is needed when you are going to cut into somebody's body, or stop their heart, you'd better think you know what you're doing. But when they give you the white coat and you get to the floor and you have to actually start practicing, you realize you know nothing. How do you actually learn to be a doctor? Not by reading books. You actually learn by watching the next guy; the guy that is there, one year ahead of you. He's your model, or at least one of them. That's how you really learn medicine, you write what he wrote and what he tells you to write, you follow his instructions, "do this, do that." You follow him around. It is the ultimate on-the-job training.

How does this process of transformation actually work with tantra? I think that you will find a lot of useful things in this practice. In fact I think that tantra is going to be very popular when it becomes more widely known, and better understood. Why? Because it's quick, and we love quick. Tantra is also a portable monastery. You can take your monastery with you, and you can even take your guru with you, a portable guru, wherever you go and for the rest of your life, our new way of life. Tantra has the vitality and the vibrancy, and the beautiful images to stand up to our consumer universe. Tibetan tantra is beautiful, it's sensuous, it's aggressive, it's dynamic, it's cool. It works like a homeopathic cure, it's designed to attract our primal natures, engage them and then work on them to transform our self, in the same way that art works according to Aristotle -- and that is by educating the passions. [1:11:05] Here

you are tinkering with your sense of self, and so you transform your whole view of reality.

This is freaky. It's like doing some sort of Shamanistic journey -- that is if it wasn't for the fact that tantra is such a rational, sensible and reproducible system of practices. And now research is being done and data is being collected that shows that it really works. Up until a few years ago we didn't know that it worked in a way that could be reproduced in the lab. At that time it felt good but it still felt like, "Why am I committing myself to this cult? Why am I doing this weird thing, why am I engaging in these practices, especially envisioning myself as a Buddha, so sometimes I may have nine heads, or thirty-four arms ... What is this?" Once we start experiencing it more we find out more.

There are safeguards that must be met, and there is no way around them. One, you must have a teacher to guide you through the practices. Part of the guiding is with the discovery of going through a full initiation, which is quite a cultural experience. There will be a chance for that when you come to the teachings that Gelek Rinpoche will offer later in the program, and you will get a feel for it. He is a remarkable person, fully Tibetan-trained, he is like a beautiful, lovable laughing Buddha. When he starts his meditation sessions you feel you get connected, really connected, like plugging into something very intense. That is because of the multigenerational legacy that he embodies. But to benefit from that there is an initiation contract, with your rights and obligations and the teacher's rights and obligations. There is a description of the code of

conduct between both parties in chapter 9 of "Sustainable Happiness". You will find it in the syllabus.

Another safeguard is the set of preliminary practices, or preliminaries, in tantra. There are three preliminaries: Renunciation, compassion, and the wisdom of emptiness. On some level, the essence of tantra practice is to play with our nature, to monkey around with our own nature -- we are going *that* deep. So certain things have to be in place to guarantee that we are going to come out at the other end as an improved human being.

First we need *renunciation*, that is we need a bit of a teflon-like mind to addictions, to use Rick Hanson's metaphor. We have to learn to let go of our addictions, to let go of what hurts us. Otherwise they will take us; and they will drive us.

As I like to say, if you are going to play with fire you have to learn to put it out first. That is a useful warning here, because tantra practices are like a fire that consumes the fuel it burns on; they trigger chemical processes, they affect our body's production of hormones. We humans generate affective states that can take us down the path of darkness, down the dark side. If we have the strength of mind to act like teflon, which is essentially to let go of the darkness, we take the energy that otherwise would take us into darkness, but now we work on it to transform it into a light energy -- this is what tantra offers. We will talk more about how that works later on. Now I want to return to the safeguards.



Another safeguard is to hold on to what is good for us: our teachers, our kindness, our compassion for other living beings, a heart that has the capacity to connect. This is not because of moral or ethical agency, like I have to be a nice person. The point is to maintain an empathic connection with your teacher; if you can't do that the whole safety system will break down. You may know how important those empathic connections are, especially if you have ever had a therapist who was not always easy to make an empathic connection with, you know how angry at them you felt when they told you this or they did that.

The second preliminary is you have to have enough *compassion*, so you can get the right teacher, so you can recognize, "I can trust this person, this is a good person, I can go through this storm with her, I can go through that storm with him. If they are telling me to calm down, I'll calm down." You have to be able to feel that towards your teacher.

The third preliminary is, of course, *emptiness*. Here we are talking about the wisdom of emptiness, or *radical open-mindedness* as I like to call it. This is important. Even if you are imagining all sorts of positive things you don't want them to turn into just another rigid personality, stuck again, only now you are up a grade. You have to be able to dissolve the new self and the new world that you are building, as you build it. It has to be self-dissolving. Because the real prison is not negativity; the real prison is self. By self I don't mean ego, I don't mean being too selfish or self-centered. I mean sticking with, locking onto one

content or one habit and believing 'that's me' for the rest of your life, staying in that one little narrow frequency and not being able to grow -- which from the Buddhist point of view is the tragedy of self, the traumatic self habit. The healthy self, on the other hand, is totally open and totally interconnected; it is always learning and growing, from every interaction with another being and everything in the world, always able to relate to everyone and everything. That is not the self that we normally think of as a self, but from the Buddhist point of view that is in fact the *ultimate self*. And in order to have that ultimate self, to build that ultimate free self, you need a radically open mind.

If you are envisioning your self as the Healing Buddha for example, it may seem as pretty harmless, what's so bad about having another Healing Buddha walking around Manhattan? Nothing. But, nonetheless, we have to meditate on the fact that this self that we are creating is empty, it is just a mental construction that we are using to get over our addiction to that old neurotic self, that old neurotic Joe, thinking that I am old neurotic Joe, and that's it. You use this self you have created as what I call a prosthetic self, you recreate your self image in the mentor's image with his or her guidance, encouragement and supervision. It's a consensual symbiotic collusion, if you will. Like a *folie-à-deux*, both student and mentor think they are Buddha, that's their state of mind; and, as a student of how to actually get there, you have to be careful not to get stuck in being any one thing. Even when you are thinking of your self as the Buddha you have to, from the beginning, meditate on, and remember that "this

is an image that I am generating to counteract my normal negativity and my normal rigid personhood, stuck with a self that can actually be translucent."

The divine pride, the pride of enlightenment, the real pride of the Buddha, the dignity of an enlightened being that I am trying to get is not that I look like the Buddha or I walk like the Buddha; it's that I realize that I actually have the radical open-mindedness, and that is the work space I need for enlightenment.

That is the divine pride, the real deity, the real Buddha. It's not the image. The image is understood as a mental construction, a cultural archetype, something or someone you choose because they inspire you. It does not have to be a Tibetan image, it can be Jesus, Mother Teresa, you can use any of those as your image. But you have to make it self-dissolving. Because, again, the purpose of the image is not to get you stuck in a new suit, only now in a Buddha suit; the purpose is to free you from the self habit that keeps you getting stuck in any one suit, any one position. And what keeps you stuck not only limits your potential; it also limits your compassion, because you can't see from another person's point of view, you are stuck looking at the whole world from your point of view only. This is where we need emptiness, to protect us from getting stuck in a new self, because emptiness is the other side of interdependence, and that means constant change, impermanence. Think of emptiness with a radically open mind, meditate on it.

Now that we have reviewed the safeguards, we move on to process, the real hard core. We are compressing the material, two weeks in one for the class

we lost to hurricane Sandy. So, how does this practice actually work? There is a teacher, there is a student, and both align with one purpose: "I want to become a better human being, a kinder and more compassionate person -- and I want to do it quickly; I want to learn to respond like a compassionate being." Gelek Rinpoche has a definition of who your guru is. He says that the proper guru for you is the person that, when he or she appears and you see their qualities, you feel "I want that." And so you go for somebody who has what you want.

In a way it is not much different from kids putting up a poster in their room of their favorite football player, or in my kids' case, the Ninja. That is where your *ego ideal* -- as psychoanalysts would say -- wants to go; and now you want to go to that place where you become the being that you could be, you want to realize your potential. How does that happen, how can you make it happen, quickly?

Well, you agree that "I'm going to be a better human being; you my teacher are going to help me; and I am going to work hard at it. Then you agree on an image to inspire and guide you, your *Ishtam-devata*, a deity of your choice, an archetype of enlightenment, a hero archetype. This is an image that connects to your imagination, connects with the inspiration and the enthusiasm to be a better being, a heroic being. You have that image and then you go through the process of what some psychologists refer to as "self psychology." Heinz Kohut, a psychologist in Chicago, coined the phrase and developed the school. But the process we are talking about here goes further,

it's more far out than that, it is self transformation. Kohut said that psychotherapy is like alchemy -- a bit like Jung, who wrote a book on psychology and alchemy. Today the psychotherapeutic tradition that is closest to the tantric process is the Jungian tradition, as represented by James Hillman and people like him. They use active imagery. James Hillman also talks about personifying, role playing. if you want to read the Western psychology version of the kind of practice we are studying here, read the works of James Hillman, especially his first work, "Re-visioning Psychology." It's a fabulous book.

Kohut describes the process of psychotherapy as one of "*transmuting internalization*," meaning a process in which you take into you something from another person, the person who is your psychotherapist, and that something triggers an alchemical reaction, like an alchemical sulfur; like the elixir of the alchemist that transforms garbage into gold. This alchemy triggers the process for transforming our ordinary garbage, our ordinary baggage, stored in our mind and body, into a new and improved way of being. And so "transmuting internalization" is about what you take in from the other person, as a result of your encounter with that other person.

In Western psychology that kind of process is broken down into four steps, or stages: idealization, identification, internalization and integration. In my view these steps line up very neatly with the process that is Tibetan Buddhist tantra. We can look at this in different ways.

First, the four steps in western psychology are consistent and line up with what Tibetan Buddhists call the '*Seven-Fold Offering*' which is a process of seven progressive steps in the mentor-student bond: admiring, welcoming, disclosing, enjoying, requesting help, requesting constancy, and dedication. And so, 'idealization', the first step in Western psychology, corresponds to the first three steps in the *Seven-Fold Offering*: 'admiring', 'welcoming' and 'disclosing'; 'identification' lines up with 'enjoying'; 'internalization' with 'requesting help'; and 'integration', the last of the four stages in western psychology, corresponds to the last two steps in the Buddhist *Offering*, 'requesting constancy' and 'dedication.'

So, in both cases, in Western psychotherapy and in tantra practice with its mentor-student bond, we are taking something in from another person, and what we are taking in from them is what transforms us.

This four-step process is also connected to the process of sublimation, which we discussed earlier in the program. We are trying to learn, to take in, to emulate from the other person the capacity to transform our emotional life, from a cauldron of stress and trauma into a crucible of blissful openness. For Freud sublimation was the capacity to harness our positive feelings like passion and use them for our process of transformation, and in that way go into deeper and deeper layers of our passions.

The four levels of tantra also line up very neatly with the four phases of the process of internalization. These levels are action, performance, internalization and integration. Let us go through these quickly.

First is the *action process*. We imagine our self as small and humble, nothing like these wonderful Buddhas that have reached enlightenment; and we feel strongly that "I need that, I need enlightenment". To get that I need the Buddhas' help, and their protection. So I go to them. This is the stage of idealization, hero worship, like religious worship, like a person going to God, although in Buddhism they are not really Gods, not in the same way.

Then comes the *performance process*. Here we are not just hero-worshipping, like a spectator in a spectator sport; here we have an active part: we are like a cheerleader. In terms of our religious culture this might play out as the role of the minister, or the priestess. And it is saying, "I'm in with God, I have an in with God; I sort of talk to God and he listens to me. I can get some favors." It's a sense of having a little part of me that is like God. That's like the identification phase in Western psychology.

Third, there is the *internalization process*. This is like suddenly God comes into me and I find God within. That happens a lot in California, as people there would say, the God and the Goddess within. This God within that is like a guide, for orientation, for getting your bearings in your inner change. Finding the God within all of us is when you feel that "now I am the player, not a spectator and

not a cheerleader, I'm a real player in the real sport." This is called *Yogatantra*, what I call *integral process*.

Finally, fourth, is the *integration process*. This is the highest orientation tantra, Anuttarayoga tantra, most often translated as the Unexcelled Yoga Tantra, what I call the *optimal integral process*. Here integration with the divine is complete. The divine is present, not just inside me but also outside of me, all around. I can see the divine inside me and I can see it in every one of you, and in all of us. Now I become a team player, I see we all have this capacity, we can all do it, we can help each other. Perhaps we need checks and balances to help each other, to bring this divine potential out... Anyhow, the important point is that we all have it inside of us, and we all can uncover it.

The four steps normally stand for different levels of intensity in the practice. At the introductory level, the action process, not much is expected of you; at the most, you will imagine your self briefly feeling what it would be like to be the Healing Buddha or the Healing Mother. But mostly you are going for help, because you don't really feel you are really there yet, you need to build your confidence through the relationship with your teacher before moving on.

When I was in training to become a therapist, one of my supervisors told me that your patients are making progress when they start to dress like you; then they are really starting to identify with you, and they are starting to progress ... Well, maybe not, maybe you don't dress like your analyst, but you are reading the same books. And so identification happens, in many ways.



The internalization stage is when you start hearing your therapist in your head: "I know I didn't need to call you, I got you in my head, and I was talking to you about it; I didn't agree with you but I tried anyway."

Then finally, it's like you become the therapist and the therapist becomes a person again, a person who maybe was a helpful guide; but now, "I have my own therapist who is me, who is inside of me, who is all part of me and I don't really feel that sense of inequality anymore. I don't feel like somebody who is up or somebody who is down or that I have something to learn." It's more like we are all into "Yes, yes, we did this, didn't we? We have been through this thing together."

In many ways this process is like any other social learning process. For example, in childhood development, children are helpless and look up to the parent, take the parent as role model. Then they start to identify with the parent; and then, in the teenage years they start to see themselves as better than the parent. Then they start to have their own children and they realize, "My parents weren't so stupid after all ...". That is the process of social learning.

I will add one more point: this practice is a cognitive, affective, behavioral, restructuring process. All these adjectives sound like fancy psychological words. The main point is that this is an alchemical process where you are learning and doing psycho-surgery, you are reshaping your mind, you are taking all the mess in your mind and you are using it as raw material in the

crucible of the relationship with your teacher and this practice. And in this way you are reconstructing your self, quickly.

Our Western therapy is to a certain extent catching up with this stuff; we are on the map now, our labs are doing research on these amazing practices and knowledge that used to be just too far out. Today there are forms of therapy, like '*narrative therapy*' and '*deep transformational affect therapy*', that use the power of narrative and deep transformative affects like *blissful states* to heal trauma and transform the self, quickly. A key element for success in this type of therapy is that we transform our perception of our own self and the world, and that means we transform our emotional experience also. In this case the four levels are broken down in terms of passion: how much passion we can transform; how much we can tolerate without acting out; how do we, creatively and constructively, sublimate that passion; and finally how we harness it into a new way of being. The ritual that is used as a model for this process is the courtship ritual. The different levels are described by using different stages in romantic courtship.

First, the action process, which here is the attraction phase, the initial phase in romantic courtship, a phase of idealization. If only we could tolerate being attracted to enlightenment ... not yet, we aren't yet ready for a steady relationship with enlightenment. But we can be attracted to it.

Then comes the performance process, which is the flirtation phase, we start flirting. Here I can actually wind my way in to get a little closer to the other, little by little, I sort of imagine tolerating and connecting with that other.

Then we move to the integral process. Here we tolerate the higher level of emotion that is caused by the embrace, that kind of feeling of closeness to a positive way of being, a positive connection, feeling safe enough with another human being to embrace him or her, to wrap our arms around the feeling, the whole feeling of enlightenment being happy and free, blissfully open.

And finally there is the climax phase. Here we feel totally orgasmic (as Bob Thurman likes to say), we feel we can let go, totally go into the experience of pleasure, safety, trust and openness, feel only the feeling that I can ride this primal energy within me, let all of my passion, all my inner passionate energy connect with this experience of openness, of enlightenment, compassion, and harness that energy to bring it to the process of transformation.

Here we are talking about stages, not just of psychic reconstruction, where you are reconstructing your sense of self in the crucible of a relationship with another, a chosen mentor, using agreed upon images and affirmations. This is also for a transformation of your emotional life, you are learning to fully transform all the negative energies that have been haunting you through your childhood, and through evolution -- Buddhists would say through eons of evolution -- and, more recently, through decades of childhood, adulthood and psychotherapy, into a positive learning experience. This is a powerful promise;

and it is an elegant system that delivers. My feeling is that tantra will become a very popular form of practice in the West. At this point very few people understand it and there are cultural barriers to it, so Tibetan practitioners are very careful about disseminating it, especially its secret teachings, which are like neuro-psychic, psycho-surgery transformational practices. And they should be. One needs to prepare well for this type of practice. More people in the West are studying with Tibetan masters. And, as these students develop more trust and confidence, and Tibetans themselves become more aware of Western civilization, the practice is becoming more open. I believe that very soon it will be all over the place.

We will spend some time talking about the Healing Mentor, the Medicine Buddha. And I will try to give you an example of how the seven steps work. As we go through the seven steps you'll see intuitively, you'll get the feeling for the seven steps, and for how the imagery process relates to the four phases, or stages, of the integration process. You will see the steps through the four stages of integration which I will point out to you as we go. You may even feel some transformation of your emotional life.

I will ask you now to envision the Medicine Buddha, and I will also ask you to call up the mental image, or spirit, or sense of a person, or personality that inspires and embodies supreme health and vitality -- that is mental, physical and spiritual balance -- in you. It can be your cat; it does not have to be the Dalai Lama. The only real requirement is that you choose somebody that is a little

ahead of you in this process. As long as they are a little ahead of you and they have good values, they have integrity, and they are not going to pretend to be further along than they are or get caught up in their own craziness; then you can travel together. One doesn't have to be super enlightened to be a good mentor. Tibetans have a saying, they say that the best Lama is the one that lives three valleys over. The idea is someone that is close enough so that you can go to get a feel when you want to with that person, but not someone so close and personal that you see all their warts and blemishes, because we all have weaknesses, which is not the idea. The idea is to have checks and balances; together we are more than we are separately, we can help each other to be better people, together we can progress more than either one of us can separately.

I think, in my personal experience, there is in the practice of psychotherapy a very simple and somewhat humble Western institution that actually plays the role of the teacher much of the time. Of course, there are therapists who are whacky and there are therapists who are duds. But there are also good ones, I have had several wonderful therapists myself and I have seen lots of people work with others to transform. It's an institution that works for us, it's the same kind of thing going on, we can help each other. I think that's the spirit here.

Mentors are necessary. In this type of practice you have to have mentors partly because you are going into deep space, on a deep spiritual journey. And

do you want to do that alone? do you have the knowledge and the courage, the experience and the confidence to trust your self, your instincts, without a guide? I wouldn't want to do that. With all the training experience and time spent with all of this I am very happy to have as many teachers as I can get. Guides are never quite dispensable even when we equal or surpass them, because they become part of us, just like our parents -- and that is a fact, that we have been reborn through the interaction with these teachers.

Images are helpful, but they are not crucial, not like teachers and other human beings are. A creative imagination is not actually part of the tantra practice; technically speaking it is a so-called *extraordinary preliminary*. It is designed to prepare our mind and our nervous system for the real work of self-transformation, which does not require these images once we reach a certain stage. The images themselves are very free-flowing about and you pick the one you want, they are just mental constructions. My dear friend, Mary Reilly Nichols, who teaches in the Hindu Kashmir Shaivism tradition, doesn't use images at all, she uses mantras. That is the Hindu approach, use mantra instead of imagery. The point of these practices is to find some way to discipline and train your mind to have the capacity to generate content; finding some way to get a handle on your out-of-control mental generator of content is very important. And images are like little levers that can help you control that process. Once you have control of it, you can throw the levers away, you don't need them anymore.

The point is to be able to control your imagination so that you are not scaring yourself and so that you are actually empowering and guiding your self usefully. They say imagery is like a ladder, once you climb that ladder you throw it away. Or a boat, you cross from one shore to the other and you don't need the boat anymore, you are now able to go on.

If you have trouble coming up with a mentor person, keep looking. People usually do. Finding someone who you trust enough to want to give your health energy over to is not easy. So for the time being you can think of the Medicine Buddha; think of the Buddha as a historical person, and use his image, that will do for now. The image is a transitional object and a gateway to upload a different way of being. That is the understanding. And you can use more than one image, you can have more than one teacher, or one mentor. If you read the Jewel Tree of Tibet, and you practice the refuge tree, you will see how everybody is up there, thousands of people that can play the role of teacher. For some people that works fine; you can put there all your favorite teachers, your spiritual icons, movie actors, fiction figures like Jane Eyre, whoever it is that inspires you, put it up on your refuge tree. Even in one image, for example an image of the Buddha, you can practice putting one teacher at the heart, one teacher at the crown, one teacher at the navel; you can put a teacher in every pore if you like. This art is very flexible, with a lot of room for improvisation, like jazz.

## Chapter Two

### Mirroring and Initiation: Finding and Binding Ideal Models

In this chapter we will continue our conversation about tantra practices and techniques. One of the key technical terms in the tantras, or as I call them the process traditions of meditation, is the *virtual body*; that is what I call it, nobody else I know calls it that. Most people call it either the *illusory body*, or *the rainbow body*. Bob Thurman used to call it the *illusory body* and now he likes to call it *the magic body*, which is a sweet translation.

So, what is it, many people have been asking me. We will talk about this in more detail later on, when we talk about *initiation* and about the process of bonding with the mentor, the process of developing a relationship in which the *initiation* is just a start. How do we start to forge a bond of trust and mutual sort of congenial inspiration and energy that actually purifies and transforms our mind? That process, when it is ritualized, is called an *initiation*; or, very literally, a *consecration*. We will discuss in more detail what this *consecration* entails at the highest level, and when we get there we will get into the *illusory body*, the *virtual body*, the *rainbow body*. For now let me give you just a brief introduction.

The *illusory body* is the form, the personification of the blissful openness that is the engine of compassion in tantra practices. In tantra practice we are taking the quick route to compassion by learning how to be -- how to get and how to stay -- in a blissfully open state of mind. Here we are learning how to work



with our nervous system, with our instincts and with our energies, so that we are in a blissfully open state of mind more and more of our time -- and that is the new us. When we are blissfully happy, aren't we a much nicer person? You may remember from the last time you felt blissfully happy, maybe even if you've only had teeny tiny bits of happiness here and there, you know how that feels and that it makes you a nicer person, easier and more fun to be with, it's just a natural thing.

The idea is we can try very hard to be good or to be truly happy. And, if we understand happiness in the specific way that we are going to examine today, that will, actually and naturally, take us into a kinder, gentler way of being, we will be kinder and gentler people, towards others and also towards our own self. So that is the idea. The *virtual body*, or *rainbow body*, is the technical term for the *form body of compassion*. This is the embodiment of compassion that we talked about in the *mind training* teachings last year. And we will be talking about the *clear light mind*, the *translucent mind*, that is the radical openness, or emptiness awareness.

For all of us, it will be helpful to review, because our last discussion crammed in a number of ideas about how this kind of practice might work, how you might open a quick path to transformation. And you do that through relationship, which is a most natural means by which we humans develop and transform and learn. Using that relationship we nurture an altruistic way of being, being fully present and unconditionally altruistic, which is a more natural,

embodied form of being. Enlightened altruism, that is what the tantras are really about. And they are quick on result because they use the most natural way for us to become who we are, the new and more altruistic me, and that is through a relationship with someone that embodies what we want, that embodies that way of being.

Now, there is a technology to be used here, for example imagery affirmation, to sort of connect with the qualities in the persons we are using as mentors, as role models, while filtering out their idiosyncrasies or inadequacies, so as to focus, exclusively, on what we want from our mentors, what we want to emulate only. If they were perfect Buddhas we wouldn't need to filter out anything because they wouldn't have any bad habits. But, if they are not yet there, are we going to wait around, without any guides, until we find one mentor that is already a Buddha? No way! We are in a rush, we are trying to transform ourselves and hopefully the world as quickly and effectively as possible, and for that we are trying to use all the available resources, and that includes live models, people who have something to mentor us about. And so we try to emulate their qualities while filtering out their idiosyncrasies, using imagery and affirmations to help us tune in as exclusively as possible on those qualities that we want. In this way we gradually internalize those qualities.

Last session we talked about the essential structure of the path, the alchemical path of self-transformation, with its four stages: idealization, identification,

internalization and integration. These four stages are the psychological touchstone, what Heinz Kohut calls 'transmuting internalization,' which is the way we can jumpstart our development, through the influence of, the interaction with, another person who has the qualities that we want.

Idealization is the first stage, and so we begin by idealizing that other person, and maybe devaluing our own qualities and projecting on to the other. Then, gradually, we come to feel a little less intimidated or awed, and a bit more of a sense of identification (second stage) with those qualities in the other person that we can really relate to and begin to think about how to emulate, because "I could be like that." Taking those qualities in and recognizing that I have them in me already (third stage), maybe in seed form, and maybe what I need is a set of checks and balances, or some touchstone, to make sure that I am tuning in to the right qualities within me. And I start to feel, "Really, the ideal way of being for me is actually already inside of me." Then, in the integration stage, which is the fourth and last stage, I get to the point where that being is neither inside nor outside of me, and I recognize that those ideal qualities are not only within me, they are also within all living beings, I recognize that we are all part of the larger process of transformation -- that is our cultural process. With that recognition I can work on my transformation with an open attitude, and together we can help to bring the best out in our own self and in each other;

That is, in brief, what we have talked about so far. An important point is that we each get to pick our own speed in approaching this practice. We can go at it easy, or quicker, and more intensely. We might feel like, "I really need some guidance, I need a mentor, I need an ideal to aspire to." Or we can feel like "I'm ready to try, sort of." As one Zen disciple said to his Master, "Master, I'm breaking out" - "Break in!" the master said.

For most of our conversations today and during the rest of this program, when we talk about the theory of tantra we are going to talk about it from the standpoint of the *Unexcelled Yoga Tantra* practice; that is the most definitive understanding of the most expanded version of the practice. It doesn't mean that we are going to be practicing it. We are not going to get the sort of ritual permission for using the tools of imagery used in those higher levels. But that is okay, theory and practice don't always have to be totally together. We are doing the practice appropriate to where we are, and in this program it means beginning with the basics, getting a feel for it; and if it seems that it works for you then you learn more and you get higher initiations and, eventually, you get more souped-up practices. The choice and speed are up to you.

Now we will go into the mentoring bond in more detail, in terms of how it is formed and how it works. And we are going to talk about mirroring. Finding mentors, binding them to us, binding our own self to them and creating a bond with them -- that is the process of mirroring and initiation, and the step for getting started on this practice.

To get the spirit of that which is really understood in this tradition, this is not just a technical practice but also an act of moral development, a sort of ethical practice. It is a way of working with our aspiration, our intention. I advise that you read a bit from Chapter 9 of "*Sustainable Happiness*", about the ethics in tantra practice. It provides a way of understanding what is the bond between mentor and student, what are the mechanics involved, the contract with the mentor's and the student's obligations, and how it all works in practice.

Part of the reason why this is really important is to get a more accurate notion of what tantra is and is not, because many of you have seen these California workshops, and now also in New York at the Open Center, Omega, or wherever they are, where they have events on chakra alignment and tantric sex and all of these things. If we look at the images in this tradition, even Vajrasattva, who is a Tantric Buddha -- and the archetype of the blissful Buddha, the Buddha who attains enlightenment through mastery, through sublimating bliss -- even with him there's a lot of sort of racy material or overtly sexual material, violent imagery, death imagery, very provocative imagery, unlike the elements of sutra teachings; and so it leads to many misunderstandings. We have to be prepared to understand those images.

There is a running joke, what if were to use, for example, the movie rating system, the censoring system that uses G for General Public, PG for Parental Guidance, R and then X rated, then the question for each of us is how adult are

we to be with our spirituality and to grow it, are we ready for tantra? Because part of its culture is that it's quick, it's racy, and it's dirty, some may call it slutty.

It is very important to understand that this does not mean that tantra is doing a runaround on the ethical dimension, this is about a quicker process of mastering our destructive intentions and emotions, and becoming a better human being. This is not about some sort of whacked-out wild, *crazy wisdom* type of practice. In this tradition *crazy wisdom* is regarded as the exception to the rule. The rule is sane wisdom, and let's have common, reproducible and constructive results. Tantra, a powerful sort of shamanistic practice, was turned into a more civilized practice by bringing it into an ethical system, and a training system, a carefully supervising and supervised practice for psychological maturing, and safe enough for mass consumption, not only for very advanced practitioners. Here you have to be advanced enough and mature enough so as not to misunderstand or misuse it.

To underscore the importance of ethics in Tibetan Buddhist tantra, let me quote from Tsong Khapa's "Brilliant Illumination of the Lamp of the Five Stages." He begins his description of Tantra saying that,

*'Such people who practice these techniques have many accomplishments, such as restraining the ten non-virtuous actions with regard to objects.'*

So the first thing he says about Tantra practitioners, those people who are supposed to be practicing this bliss stuff, they are actually doing the same thing that the boring old monks and nuns are doing, so as not to hurt anybody or steal anything or do anything inappropriate like that, like the actions in the *Ten Commandments*. That is the first accomplishment, to actually keep the Ten Commandments' which of course, is quite an accomplishment on its own right, as we know.

*'Purifying their mind-body processes by means of initiation'*

This is what we are going to talk about today.

*'Guarding properly their vows and pledges'*

We are also going to begin our conversation about this today, and continue over the next five or so sessions.

*'Cultivating the concentration of the first creation stage and  
Being expert in the sign of the control of passion'*

This is about restraining non-virtuous actions and cultivating virtuous ones. This is like the preliminaries that we talked about before: Renunciation, or learning how

to let go before we get hurt; compassion, or learning how to help others who are hurting themselves; and emptiness, or openness, so that we can take on transformation.

The purification by means of initiation is unique to this system. It's the first kind of preliminary, about how we develop a bond with a teacher, or with a system of practice that is workable, safe and reliable. How we stay true to that practice, that's what '*guarding commitments and pledges*' is about, and about staying true specifically to those included in the Unexcelled Yoga tantras.

There are two stages in the practice of yoga tantras. The first stage is the *creation stage*. Here we use our creative imagination to simulate spiritual experiences, transformational experience. We use imagery, we say affirmations, and there are lights and nectars flowing all over the place.

The second stage is the *perfection stage*. Now we are actually having those experiences and actually being transformed. This is the neurobiological and psycho-spiritual process that allows us to sublimate all the potentially destructive instincts and forces within us, into wonderful, life-giving, protective and illuminating forces. It's about deeply transforming our nature so we have nothing to fear from it, so it is only a gift to us, all of it. We are going to talk about the perfection stage more next year. For now we'll have a brief introduction, go over it in a very schematic way, as part of our talk about initiation. I am trying to present this tantra practice at the highest level in a way that you understand how it all works. I will try to present it in the simplest way to learn it.



Because it can get too confusing.

We'll also talk about the nuts and bolts of the practice: how does initiation work? How does forming a mentoring bond purify our mind-body process? What are the commitments and pledges, why would we want to guard them and how do we guard them? What are we signing up for here and what do we get for doing this? That is all part of the preliminaries of what we will start next week, which is to cultivate the creative imagination process, the role modeling imagery process.

At the beginning, Tsong Khapa explains the '*eat, drink and be merry*' kind of images of the tantra practices. He says,

*Our bliss comes from the flourishing of the enlightenment spirit of orgasmic ecstasy in one's body, and for that you have to take care of your body and the senses; that is why we teach the conduct, that the five senses rely on the five objects of desire.'*

Tantra is the path on which we feed the senses what they want. And how can we do that without getting all mixed up in them, seduced by them, drawn into them, lost in them, in a way that we don't end up not just being consumerists, materialists and hedonists? Tsongkhapa advice is provided in another beautiful passage,

*'Setting the mind in the reality of enlightenment,  
Enjoying the bliss of objects one achieves in this very life.  
All these persons and things are pure in intrinsic reality,  
Ordinary objects being selfless and illusory,  
Like hallucinations and optical illusions,  
Non-local, delivered from thought conventions - (beyond conceptuality)  
When noble persons totally realize  
The magnificent ambition (of compassion) and the habit-free mind (of  
openness)  
Then their orgasmic realization prevails  
And the power of these objects no longer bind.'*

In other words, by training our own capacity to experience bliss from within we don't get addicted to objects, we don't get addicted to things, we don't need them, we become independent of them. Now we are generating our own pleasure, we don't need to prop up our lives in those little sensual satisfactions, like the perfect espresso in the morning, or whatever it is that you are addicted to.

How do we do that? The essence of this is, Tsongkhapa says, "*Setting the mind in the reality of enlightenment knowing that all these things in intrinsic reality are selfless and illusory like hallucinations and optical illusions.*" This implies that if we

don't really understand things as they really are, just as Nagarjuna said in his "Reason Sixty",

*'Beginners are fooled by things and they get attached to them;  
the intermediate stage is that, by dint of effort and ethics,  
we become detached;  
but it is only through understanding the nature of reality that one is really  
freed. Understanding the nature of things one is really free.'*

In other words, frustration follows our addictions, because addictions are never fully satisfied, they arise from our distortion, our cognitive distortion, our misunderstanding about how pleasant things outside of ourselves, in the conventional external world, really are. When we have those distorted and inflated notions we end up with addictions. That is what the advertising industry is designed to do, to generate these desires, these wants, these addictions, in us. The advertising industry is about illusion generation, and this illusion civilization is really pumping it up out there like there's not tomorrow: "*this* is going to make you happy, and *that* is going to bring you true everlasting satisfaction." This pumps up our internal, distorted, exaggerated fantasies about how much happiness comes from external satisfaction, from objects and people out there. And the more unrealistic our expectations, the stronger their attraction, the

more we go for those objects as we pursue happiness. As we become more frustrated and want more, satisfaction becomes a more and more remote goal.

We can avoid all that from the beginning with a true understanding that things are illusory. They appear to our senses as much more powerful than they really are. They don't have the level of reality that we invest in them. Our minds trick us by projecting a kind of reality, a kind of permanent quality, a kind of stability onto the objects we desire, so that we think that if they give us a bit of pleasure for a little bit of time, it will be even more pleasant if we have a lot of it for a longer period of time ... in short, more is better, so we always want more!

We generate a lot of fantasy around objects, including other human beings. Because we objectify other human beings, we objectify their bodies or minds, or whatever it is in them that attracts us, and fools us -- or we fool ourselves -- into thinking that having that object or being with that person is going to make me happy. That is the fantasy that the whole romance industry in Hollywood is built on. Of course, if you get lucky enough to get into a really healthy and intimate relationship, then you find out, "This is all good and well, but this is just another person, just like me. So how is that going to work for us? I don't have it, he doesn't have it, or she doesn't have it, where are we going to get it from, where are we supposed to get it from?" So you begin to understand how really empty the mechanics of desire and satisfaction are. Of course, at the bottom of it it's the company that's lovely, it's wonderful to have company. But, of course, it

depends on company in what? Company being miserable together ... that soon grows old. If you are on a path that is actually sensible, and that makes you both happier people, then it's good company on a good journey -- and then things get better and better.

A frequently asked question is, "How can we really invest so much in mentors or role models, how do we ever really know who are the reliable people? What happens when they disappoint us? This happens all the time. People invest in mentors and then the mentors disappoint them.

In the Western modern tradition, an anti-hero tradition came out of the Age of The Enlightenment, out of the death of God, and especially out of modernism. The message was that because there is no perfect human being, there is no point on relying on anybody other than our own self. If you really think about that message, the implication is that there is nobody to learn from; that anyone who pretends to have anything to help you, or you think has anything to help you, is actually full of it, tricking you, it's some sort of a cynical game. This is our cultural relationship with spirituality going back to the Age of Reformation and the disillusionment with Rome and the Roman Church. There were some good reasons for this disenchantment, no doubt about it. But we probably went too far, we threw out the baby with the bath water.

What is the baby we threw out with the bath water? The baby, that's other people, because it's through our relations with others that we grow. If you want

to grow and you are not feeling any love for anybody else, not feeling there's anyone with something to offer you, anyone worth taking the risk of losing them or being hurt, your system is not really going to grow. There is no short cut here. That is also why psychotherapy works, that is why we have a psychotherapy industry. The reality is that we need other people to get us outside and beyond our limitations at a deep level. Unless we are willing to risk being disappointed we will be stuck with our own inner limitations.

Then there is this larger issue of how to choose our mentors. What happens when we choose unwisely, or choose wisely but as it turns out humanity gets the better of that person? There are remedies and ways for dealing with that, ways of dealing with a bad therapist or with a bad mentor. But this doesn't mean that you are better off without any help at all.

One of the ways of protecting our self is by using the very subtle and sophisticated art of projection: we project our image of the ideal way to be onto our mentor, our guru. In fact, there is a very interesting practice in the Tibetan tradition, in which you are supposed to view your mentor as a sort of embodiment of a fully enlightened Buddha, as a temporary reference point for your ideal, what this ideal would look like in the flesh. And when you are meditating on your mentor you do so in the image of a fully enlightened Buddha. The rest of the time you are supposed to relate to your mentor as you do with any ordinary person. This is like if you meet your therapist on the street or in the supermarket. What are you supposed to say? You greet him or her, just like

any other person, you say, "Hello, how are you, what are you getting? In other words, the role is specific to the work that you are doing with that other person, it's not supposed to be a general, full-time "I'm a child again and this person is everywhere and everything to me, my full time beacon." In fact, I have heard some stories of the Dalai Lama getting irritated, in a therapeutic way but nonetheless getting irritated, at his lieutenants because they are too fawning. He says, "Come on, I need you to challenge me and help me, think of me as a peer, don't think like Dalai Lama wa-las, like groupies, I don't need that."

Of course, if we have special gratitude and affection toward that person, because he turns out to be reliable and helpful to us, then the relationship may grow and become very friendly, like a relationship with a good mother, a good father or a good teacher, something like that. On the other hand, if that the person we thought would be a good teacher turns out to be, for example, more troubled than they appear, then we may move on. We don't totally park our ideal on any one person; we just put it there temporarily, that is part of the contract to form a mentor-apprentice bond. The mentor agrees to be used as a screen for your ideals, and to live up up to them, as best as he or she are able to, until the apprentice does not need that support any more. The apprentice, on the other hand, agrees to work hard to live up to the established ideals with the mentor's support -- that is the contract. In this tradition you don't invest everything.

Then of course, there is always the reality of the situation, the ultimate reality. And that is, if you understand emptiness, if you really think about it, how can you invest everything in anybody or anything? If you understand emptiness you understand that your mentor is empty, that your ideal image of your mentor is empty. What does that mean? That it is not as real as it seems, that you can't get naively hung up on it being this way or that way, or any one way; it's all relative, it all depends on the context. Your mentor may be a Buddha compared to you but maybe not compared to his own mentor, or somebody else down the block. We can come back to this issue later on.

One of the ways this tradition deals with this; the tradition has come up with many strategies to try to create checks and balances, like in a distributive kind of economy that has to protect this kind of investment.

Look at the jewel tree that Bob Thurman describes in his book, "The Jewel Tree of Tibet." When you do this practice you are envisioning not just one mentor but one special person who you put in the middle of the tree surrounded by hundreds of mentors. That is the idea here it is not like the idea of a Christian notion or even the Jewish notion that there is one Messiah. The idea here is that we *all* have this quality. It's like when you hear *namaste* in yoga class, it's just the Indian greeting, everybody says it to everybody, and what it means when you use that kind of honorific expression it means "I bow to the God in you," or "I honor you as a God."



There is no shortage of mentors. We have to learn how to choose and work effectively with people as mentors, that onus is on us, and this tradition teaches us how to go about it. How do we do that? How do we use people who might not be perfectly enlightened beings as if they were perfectly enlightened beings, so that we can quickly develop and become more enlightened than we are now?

We don't have to wait for perfection. We humans have a fine intuition about this, so trust your intuition. That is what I tell people when they are looking for therapists: shop and try to pick someone you feel really comfortable with, you feel something special about, trust that. And if it turns out to be something that is not completely true don't worry too much about it, it's rarely the case that it is going to be totally bogus, that you are totally wrong. There may be an issue with exaggeration, a little bit off here and there, and if it turns uncomfortable then you learn about your intuition. But that is the best guide, you have to act. And you move on.

I mentioned earlier that tantra is a practice that protects us. It protects us from getting overly involved, obsessed, addicted or overly idealized or in awe of people or things. How does this work? Tsong Khapa said,

*"Minds arising dependent on a sense and an object are said to be 'man.' "*

And what is 'man'? It's the first syllable of *mantra*, which is another word for tantra, in a poetic form, it's a poetic path. What is the poetic path? Etymologically speaking, mantra is composed of 'man' which is 'mind', both subject and object; and 'tra' means 'protection'. So 'mantra' is about protecting your mind. How does it protect your mind? Tsong Khapa says, "*Protecting the mind by means of all the adamant commitments and pleasures explained, free from the ways of the world; that is called the practice of mantra.*"

What does that mean? You protect your mind by using its power to create images, visual and auditory and other kinds of images, images that insulate your mind from the triggers that the world places in your way. We talked about this earlier. You substitute the images in your mind: you bring in affirmations and you let go of your negative perceptions. Remember the experiment on perceiving green or red when you are shown the color red but you had previously been exposed to green? If you 'see' the image green in your mind, then red can look green to you. So, you substitute positive for negative -- because if you can imagine hearing little tingling bells of kindness, anger can sound kind to you.

This is like the original teaching on how to protect our mind from consumerism, the noise or the garbage that is on the internet and in the air waves. How do we do it? We build a better filter, we install an inner filter, a poetic vision, a better virtual reality of who we want to be and what the world is,

and that protects our mind from getting overly invested in stuff that is no good for us.

Then there is the question of what protects our mind, what is the filter letting in and keeping out, so-to-speak? What protects our mind is actually recognizing emptiness. It's a self-dissolving medicine. Emptiness is the medicine that protects our mind from its ability -- or habit -- to distort reality and see more than there is; it disarms the triggers and then it dissolves itself. This happens as we are practicing meditation on emptiness regularly; we realize that even the images that we are using to filter our sense of self are themselves self-dissolving. Practicing in this way we start getting used to the idea that we are the masters of our perception, to a much greater extent than we thought initially.

I want to tell you a bit about my own introduction to Tantra. I started studying Buddhism in college, at Amherst, with Bob Thurman. I ran into him in my first religion class. This was Bob's first year after getting his PhD, back from India, back from his stint as a monk. Now he was a lay person and a lay teacher. I remember Bob, with his flower tie and glass eye, talking about the amazing tantras, about the beauty of the visualizations, the Buddhist view of reality, the subtle cosmic nervous system, all this stuff. At that time there was no core curriculum. So I basically spent three quarters of my time at Amherst studying with Bob. I managed to get a few pre-med requirements in there, and then I went off to medical school. After that I took a year off and went to India with

Bob. I was sick of medicine by that time, my feeling about medical school was, "You call this education?..."

In India we went to the great Drepung Loseling Monastery, which is the main monastery in the Dalai Lama sect, to meet the Dalai Lama's main tutor. At that time there were very few Westerners going there. This time it was just Bob and me. And Gelek Rinpoche was there with us. There I had my first *initiation*. We had an initiation, all in Tibetan. We were staying in Gelek's college, in his community, made mostly of Tibetans. Bob and Gelek helped me prepare for the initiation. They spent time quizzing me, the new kid, asking, what's-this and what's-that. We finally got past the preliminaries. And we got to the initiation. It was an amazing experience. The main ritual is this: You imagine this mandala palace, and you go up to the door, and you look for the mentor within. The mandala is a heavenly world, very rich; the sensibility and the aesthetic and the inner architecture, the neural, biological, social, cultural, architecture of enlightenment, it's all there ... and you want to live there.

So you knock on the door and the mentor asks, "Who are you and what do you want?" The traditional answer is, "I am the lucky one and I want great bliss" -- how cool is this! That's why I travelled to India, all the way out here, and it was hot hot hot, and full of mosquitoes!

My first initiation practice was the Manjushri practice, which is an unexcelled yoga tantra practice. It took me five years to figure it out, how to do it, which end was up. It was very complicated and very challenging; but that

was my practice, so I did it. As part of the initiation there were commitments and pledges, which we'll talk about later in some detail. In that particular initiation, the pledge was to do a meditation practice everyday once a day, and some other practice six times a day. So it was a fairly intense practice.

The point of the story is that there was much learning from the practice, gradual learning, over years and years. About twenty years later, after a number of retreats, I was moving along my practice but I felt I needed a little refresher. I went to Gelek Rimpoche for another initiation of the same Manjushri practice. As I was going through the initiation for a second time, I heard my self saying, "Yeah, yeah ... now I understand what is happening, finally." And then we got to that passage, that great line, "Who are you and what do you want?" Now I knew what to say: "I am the lucky one and I want great bliss." And then I heard the line that came after that: "What are you going to do with it?" Funny thing, I had totally forgotten that line! And I think that was really interesting.

The answer, interestingly, is what this bond is all about, it is "I am going to keep the commitments and pledges of the Buddhas." The idea is to mentor and to cultivate the art of sublimation, the art of using wisdom and method, using also the science and knowledge of the nervous system, to cultivate bliss, to enjoy the blissful things in the world, and to do so without getting hooked-up on them. As one of the many beautiful verses says, we feed the animal spirits, the spirits of enlightenment, the spirits of unconditional love and compassion.

How do we feed them? By loving and being kind to ourselves, to our bodies, and as we do that we experience bliss, and then we take that bliss and we actually do the right thing, we learn how to be. In a way, this is the ultimate answer to practicing one of the Ten Commandments, the commandment of 'Love thy neighbor as thyself.'

Some of us may wonder, as Freud wondered, "Okay, that's a great idea; but how do people, people into suffering, flagellating themselves, for example, make it there? How can we expect them to do something that they are not capable of doing?"

One of the things about this tradition, about the mentor-student contract, is that it asks you -- and it encourages you and challenges you -- to do extraordinary things and hold yourself to extraordinary standards; and it gives you the methodology to do that. In this case, the methodology is learning to really get the most out of your life, out of your being, learning how to enjoy being in your own body and in a human world, so that you can be a happy person, and then you can be the kind of person, the kind of helpful, open and good person that you want to be. It's a very interesting and unusual kind of contract. It bears some similarity to the relationship with our therapist in Western psychology, only with a little more social responsibility thrown in there, with a sense that it is not just about "You get better and our work is done." Instead there is the sense that "You get better and after that your work starts!" Because your work at that point is to become a kind of therapist to the world -- or, at

least, start with your friends and family. That is the essence of the contract. It's a two-way bond and it obliges both people to work hard to help communicate -- and spread -- the art of sublimation.

About sublimation, it is a big word, it comes out of the Western alchemical tradition; Jung and Freud both liked it and used it quite a lot. What does it mean? Sublimation is the capacity to get the pleasure that there is in things, and use that pleasure, the energy in that pleasure, to do what you *really* want to do, which is to live up to your ideals, to do what you most ideally want to do, not what your animal forces or your lower instincts or demons are pushing you to do.

Lama Yeshe, for example, in his beautiful "Introduction to Tantra," explains the Buddhist approach, the *Middle Way*. I have talked about this at some length before. The idea of Buddhism is not hedonism, and it's not asceticism, not self-sacrificing, not self-denying. With the *Middle Way* you learn to enjoy the good things in the world, to be a happy person, yet a person that does not look for ultimate happiness in small satisfactions such as sensual satisfactions. You see happiness as something much larger, beyond your own nose, something that is transforming your self, transforming your world, opening your mind, opening your capacity to realize and enjoy what's really happening around you.

Lama Yeshe says that there is no problem with pleasure, the problem may be in what we do with it. In general, we humans find pleasant things and we expect them to become more and more pleasant; and when they disappoint

us, we freak out. The art of pleasure includes knowing when to let go, and what the limitations are. That's becoming a real connoisseur, when you don't expect things to give you any more than they can give you. Then you know how to play this, you know what things can really give you, and you can pull out of that involvement, pull away from them and come back to a reservoir of happiness within, because you are not wasting the pleasure left and right but using it positively, to get closer and closer to your ideal. So now you have a 'sustainable happiness' that you can really use to be the kind of person you want to be.

So you see how sublimation is an incredibly important art. I want to get that essential message across here. That is really what the initiation practice is all about. It is actually a contract to learn the art of happiness, in a way, but this is not ordinary happiness, it is the kind of happiness that is not just a personal self-indulgent, "eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you will die" kind of thing; this happiness is truly sustaining, and sustainable in the long term, sustaining the growth and development of myself as a human being, and of my relationships with others and the world around me, which are now part of my happiness.

How do I do that? I learn to squeeze out more happiness out of less stimulation, and to work with it internally, by cultivating my mind and my nervous system. Some people ask, "Is this the essence of process oriented ethics?" And the answer is yes. The essence of process oriented ethics is that we learn to be happy, not for self-indulgent, traumatic, neurotic, self-centered, or narcissistic reasons. This is not just about 'my happiness.' In a way, we learn to be happy as



a public service. Because, in Buddhism, happiness is not about self-interest, happiness is actually a public interest. Think of it: if I am a happy person I am much easier for everyone to get along with, and I might actually do my job better, and I might actually be helpful to other people or think of something useful to do. Happiness is a service in the Buddhist context. It's freedom, it's where our real bliss and happiness lie. Why? Because, in their understanding we don't need happiness from outside, it's all inside, in us. All we need is to free ourselves from the poisonous material that we are injecting into our mind all the time. And then we'll be in bliss. We are bliss factories, bliss bubbles; it's all there. But we are busy polluting and tainting our environment all the time, we are all sort of tied up in knots and stress, and we don't know how to tap into our inner resources. We have shut off the happiness factory in our own backyard, and we're out, running around looking for happiness outside of ourselves. That kind of lasting, sustainable happiness can never come from outside. Why? Because external conditions are always impermanent, transient conditional, out of our control -- and so they can't.

If the American dream has proven anything, it's that wealth is oversold as a source of real, lasting happiness. If we look at the inequality problem, of how wealth is distributed in our society, why is it that so much goes to the top one percent, the richest one percent? Because they feel they need to have ten thousand, or a hundred thousand, or whatever number of times more money and riches than the rest of us -- and they are still not happy! But the problem is

not this top one percent. The real problem is, why is our culture, our global culture of the XXI Century, not telling us that after we get a certain amount of wealth we need to move elsewhere if we really want to become happier? Instead, this culture tells us, "Just keep getting more and more, and that'll bring you more and more happiness." But it really doesn't. On some level, you might then say, that one percent of people have the most frustration, the most unhappiness, because they are the most divorced from more effective sources of happiness, in some respects at least, surely the focus on wealth limits the life experience in crucial ways. The Buddhist view is that we all need to understand that happiness, the real thing, sustainable in the long term, can't come from outside ourselves, ever; my happiness has to be self-generated -- with a little help from my friends.

The essence of process ethics is becoming a better human being; and, incidentally, it is going to help make me be a happier person too. The reason why happiness is so important, Tsong Khapa says, is that it also happens to be the best condition for our healing. Think about it. When we are happy, not only are we best disposed to be friendly, helpful and understanding towards others, we are also best disposed to be able to let go of our own self-protective instincts, our neurotic habits and conditionings.

That is why hypnotherapists, and other kinds of therapists who use visualization for trauma, who use therapies like EMDR (that is, Rapid Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), are always talking about an

*affect bridge*. What is that? It is a link between a positive state of mind and a trance state in which you are confronting negativity. If you are going to confront negativity it is really important to be in a positive frame of mind; otherwise you'll get all tied-up in the negativity of the situation and it will only get worse. This is part of the reason why we don't dive into our minds *all* the time, because we have to be in the right mood. Sometimes we sense it's not the right time to go into that stuff, because it's just going to be like opening a can of worms, it will only make things worse.

Tantra gives us an empowered, affectively positive, heroic personality, a personality that we can bring into our own minds and make it work with our own ideal personality, to bravely and boldly let go of the garbage in our own minds, let go of all the self-protective instincts, in short all the negative imprints that we have been holding on to forever, because with tantra we are blissfully confident enough to let go.

And bliss, what is our interest in bliss? Bliss makes it much easier to free our minds of negative instincts and bad habits. I think it's Naropa, I'm not sure, who talks about the 'magnificent ambition' of the vision and spirit, the imagination, the inspiration, to transform the world through altruism, and to transform our mind into a habit-free mind, a mind that is totally free from the habit of suffering. Both these states, for the world and for me as an individual, can be achieved through the art of sublimation. And the mentoring bond is what gives us permission to practice that art.

Let's talk now a bit about *initiation*. The initiation process includes the whole *path*, it touches on all of it. The first thing we encounter on the initiation path is the gatekeeper, the mentor who has mastered the art, the teacher who knows how it works. We form a relationship with our mentor because we want to learn from his way of being. And the relationship is one of responsibility going two ways. The mentor has the responsibility to teach us about the path and the practice, and to uphold his ethical standards; and we as students have the responsibility to do the practice as the mentor tells us to. The mentoring process works partly by protecting our mind, because the mentor lends us what I call a 'prosthetic sense of self and world' that gives us a kind of vicarious immunity; it's like the immunity that Achilles got when his mother dipped him in the river Styx -- but of course she held on to that heel, so he was still vulnerable.

Being in a relationship with a mentor who has some real experience or realization of the freedom, the happiness that comes from this kind of art, can vicariously protect us to a great extent. Ultimately, as we move along we will gain relief because by practicing that art every day we learn, in small steps, how to protect our own mind from our own negativity; then every time we protect our own mind from our own negativity we feel a little bit closer to happiness. This isn't just about that other person, this is not just borrowed, this is real.

One of the commitments that is made in the Unexcelled Yoga tantras is to do our practice every day according to its pledges and commitments, which are clearly spelled out. Then we will become fully enlightened, in one to sixteen lifetimes; in other words, within a finite period of time. For the ideal mastery, if we really can work intensively, it could take six to ten years; for those of us who are busy doing many other things it might take ten to twenty years, or twenty to twenty-five years. But, we all have some time, and why not give it a shot, this is a great thing to do with our lives.

How does it guarantee that kind of outcome? How is that guarantee possible? It's possible because the pledges and commitments are *practiced* pledges and commitments. How this tradition has teeth is that by committing to do certain things with our mind six times a day, or eight times a day, over a period of years, we are committing to a certain intensity and frequency of self-transformation. Practitioners can say that if you a specific level of practice you will have a specific result within a given period of time. This is a process with results that are concrete, because you are doing concrete things.

The initiation gives me the sense of proximity to, the contact high, it gives me inspiration, I feel in the presence of something better. But the thing that actually delivers the goods, meaning the happiness, is doing this practice every day; without that it doesn't work. That's why commitments and pledges are included, because if you don't do the practice you don't get the benefit. No matter how super your guru is and how much you adore and love your guru,

adoration, worship, love and idealization are not enough and will not do anything in the long run except lead you to disappointment. It's really up to you to practice, and it's up to the other person to teach you how.

The initiation is not only a ritual that imaginatively leads you through the journey to enlightenment, it's also a map of that journey. As you advance through the map you get permission to learn the tools that will take you through the different phases of the journey. The initiation simply tells you, "You can do this, and these are the tools that you are going to need." And so it plants a seed in you. Then there is the contract, for the whole journey, the contract is in the initiation ritual, because it's necessary. And the contract is very detailed, all is spelled out, "You are going to do this, then you are going to do that; I am going to do this and I am going to do that ... and then you get there." Otherwise you don't get there.

There are four permissions to be granted for four levels, or stages, of practice for mastering your bliss network within, and your capacity for blissful openness. The vase initiation is first. Its name refers to the vase used to pour water on our crown when we are going through an initiation. This is a fivefold initiation, a consecration for the purification of the five systems, or aggregates, of our compulsive mind-body processes. In unexcelled or optimal yoga tantra this part of the initiation includes all the basic elements present in the other three tantra traditions, the action, performance and integral process traditions. After the case initiation comes the secret initiation, then the intuitive wisdom initiation,

and finally these is the word initiation. The last three initiations are unique to the unexcelled yoga tantra.

The vase initiation gives us permission to practice the two parts of the *creation stage*, made of coarse and subtle substages. It gives us permission to transform our ordinary perception of our own self, as an ordinary cornered animal, or neurotic person, or even just a big ego if we think we are a big ego, whatever is our ordinary perception of our self, is up for transformation, a transformation in our own perception of our mind and body processes, now perceived as a Buddha mind-and-body process, a home of Buddhas, a temple for enlightenment, where to learn to see the universe as the place in which I will realize enlightenment and then bring it to all living beings -- not the place where I am afraid that this or that is going to happen, or the place where I want this or that to happen, but the place in which I am going to realize enlightenment, and I am going to share that realization with all living beings. In other words, the vase initiation helps in transforming our perceptions, our perception of the world, our cognition, our conception of the world, from the ordinary, constricted image of ourselves, an image that we got from our families and our culture, our neuroses and a fearful image of the world; into a radical vision of our full potential, and the potential of the universe, which is to be perfected.

The *secret initiation* gives us permission to practice the *perfection stage*. The perfection stage has five sub-stages, but I won't bother you with that now. The point here is that, essentially, the secret initiation tells us that we have the

power to sublimate the bliss that is within our nervous system, that we have the spirit of enlightenment; we have the animal spirits of blissful openness, of unconditional love and compassion in our nervous system, and we can learn how to sublimate them through some specific practices.

The *intuitive wisdom initiation* allows us to practice the third and fourth of the five *perfection stages*. It tells us that when we use the bliss that we learn to generate through sublimation to free our minds of instincts and habits and experience radical openness, which can be understood as translucency, clear light translucency, or the clear light of bliss, or the clear light of death, however you want to describe that. Then we are ready for the next step.

In the third sub-stage of the *perfection stage* we develop our virtual body, which is the capacity to personify blissful openness. We are now able to know what it feels like to be a totally blissful open being, we have a new sense of self, a prosthetic self that is not just a mental image of myself as an ideal, now it is connected with the inspirational energy to really be an embodiment of joy. That is the impure virtual body; and when we immerse that in reflection on emptiness, or openness, or death, we develop the translucent mind. We develop the translucent mind and the virtual body through intuitive wisdom and the mastery of bliss, and we get a new blissful persona with a blissful body and a translucent mind.

The final initiation is the *word initiation*. This is about the actual word teachings, the teachings that are given to help us check if we are on the right



track, if we have the pure forms of these raw materials, and how to bring them together into a whole new masterful altruistic way of being.

The set of instructions from our mentor is what prepares us to integrate the blissful virtual body, or euphoric body, with the translucent mind, or ecstatic mind. Through repeated immersions we can say good-bye to our old ego and dissolve away the last remnants of our frightened traumatized neurotic protective self, and move on to be a heroic altruistic being, totally, one who is living out of pure spontaneous blissful openness. That is pretty far out, right? That is the last stage of the *perfection stage*, which is the integration stage.

We will go into these stages in more detail later on, in some form or another, so that you have some way of finding where to hang your hat next year. For now that is as far as we go. All these stages make a brief appearance in the initiation, because we have to know what is it that we are being introduced to, initiated to, what's possible for us through this methodology, and what is accessible to us.

As we saw before, this is a methodology for becoming an enlightened altruist in a very short period of time, using our innate, natural capacity for bliss to open our nervous system, purify our nervous system and then reach in to that open pure nervous system and get the raw materials we need for a new way of being in the world, a way that becomes a heroic altruistic agency. We may or may not get to all of those stages; but we need to know about them, if not we will certainly never get there, at least as far as I know. But, who knows, maybe

some people may have a near-death experience, or they may be touched by something very special, and then, suddenly, they become a Buddha. That would be great. As the Dalai Lama likes to say, "If you can make a pill for it I would love it, that would be great, I wouldn't have to do all this meditation." If we come up with the enlightenment pill, with the altruism pill, that will be great! But it's better not to count on it. You know, or you may have heard, we have come up with the ecstasy pill; but it's fake, it's not real ecstasy, it's trouble.

In our program we will go over the basic visualization practices of the Healing Mother and the Healing Mentor. If you want a traditional connection to them, Gelek Rinpoche is going to give us next semester a blessing and the permission to practice them, within the Tibetan Tradition. In this program you don't just get Joe for practicing from a liberal arts point of view; you also get the perspective of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition from Gelek Rinpoche, a wonderful teacher who is part of the lineage. And we have to be respectful of this connection. If you like you can also experiment with other traditions. Next semester we will be focusing more on the Sheer Brilliance and the Wisdom Mother practices.

Some of the practices we have talked about, including the visualizations, are in full printed version in "Sustainable Happiness", and they are also posted on the web site of the Nalanda Institute, in printed and audio versions. Some of the versions of the same practice are not all exactly identical, each version is a little bit different; but the basic structure is the same. It's an improvisational system, it's

poetic, but the basic structure is always the same, always the *seven steps*. We'll be going over how to practice those seven steps again, what they mean, what you should be thinking of when you practice them and how they prepare you to move forward, to progress. And I will go over the different stages and the terminology, which at times differs.

Tantra is designed to give you many things. It is designed to give you what I translate as "freedom of body." That is the stage when you have an image of your body, a sense of your body, a relationship to your body that is free from self-protective instincts of stress and traumatic memories; that's a body free and pure. Then you begin working on developing "freedom of speech." That means your speech energy, your mental inner dialogue and all of the energy that is associated with it -- like expressive energy, attitudinal mood energy, and so on -- is all free from stress-reactive and traumatic thinking. That is a deeper level of purifying our speech, what is understood as our inner dialogue, our inner voice. Next comes "freedom of mind." Now we free our primal, most primordial, undifferentiated deep-sleep awareness of the instincts and conditionings of stress and trauma. We learn how to experience continuous blissful openness when we are meditating. But we still can't experience it outside of meditation.

Then there is the 'virtual body' or, in other contexts, 'self-consecration.' One is essentially reborn, out of that freedom of mind, as a blissful being, as a pure blissful being who says, "This is the new me, this is the Buddha me, it's been hiding in there all the time, my native genius, this is really me." We take this virtual

body that is still impure and we keep immersing it, immersing it and dissolving it back into death -- letting go, dissolving the death of the old, the old neurotic self, look at it as a metaphor -- and into clear light, into dissolution, purging even the most subtle instincts, remnants of obscurity, reification and confusion, until we get to the so-called *ultimate clear light*.

Transformation here is like a near-death experience, because you are experiencing a melting down to the end of your self-protection and letting go. And, finally, you take the virtual body and the translucent mind that are the result of the clear light stage, and you grow into them, and you cultivate their synergies and further purify them into a unified new way of being that becomes your master altruist way of being.

I mentioned before but I did not spell out something that I think is important, a sort of anthropological note about the meaning of 'initiation.' 'Consecration' is really the best translation, because it is about making someone or something sacred. 'Consecration' comes from the ritual for anointing royalty in ancient India. The idea in this case is that each one of us is being anointed as a King or Queen of our own universe and our nervous system. This idea, as you can see, totally upends any kind of notion of a culture of the tantras that is hierarchical, even though there are hierarchical elements in Indian Buddhism and in Tibetan Buddhism. In this case this is a subversive idea, because it's like appointing everybody as the President, appointing everybody as the ruler of the universe. This is about giving a kind of ultimate empowerment to each one of us,

to declare that, 'I am really it!' In tantra it is not an initiation in the sense of "I am initiating you," which lays down a hierarchy. It's more like an anointment, a recognition that we are, all of us, already, the creators of a very egalitarian tribe of humanity, and each one of us is all humanity, in a matter of speech, like a hologram. That is a lovely subtlety, I think it's an important one.

## Chapter Three

### Admiring and Welcoming: The Active Stage of Idealization

We have basically finished the more theoretical part of the program, and now we will get into the practice; this is the traditional way of approaching this kind of practice. And actually there is no purely theoretical part in this. You will see that when Gelek Rinpoche comes in January. He will say a few words, and next thing you know you are right into the visualization! And then it all just happens... You may get some pieces of paper here like in any other course. But the point is you leave and you practice; this is a very practical program.

We Westerners don't have the culture of "What is this?" For us it is more a question of function, more like "What do we do with it?" We are more inclined to practice than theory. I think it is helpful to have both. Also, here we give you the Nalanda tradition, and that means we give you the theory to empower everyone to be most thoughtful and at the same time an effective practitioner. But you shouldn't feel burdened by the theory, or pressured by it, like you have to get it. This will start working whether you get it or not; and eventually it will start to click in.

In the Tibetan tradition there is the idea of the beatific body of the Buddhas, their beautiful bodies, made beautiful by their experience of the Divine; their beautiful forms may be long gone, but we can bring their presence back, by imagining them. Imagination is a very useful skill. This exhibit is an

opportunity to imagine. These beautiful forms are actually teaching aids and ways of expressing experiences of enlightenment. They are there to sort of give us a message, an idea of, "What is this? What does it feel like?" That particular form of enlightenment comes through in a subtle way, it's a subtle intuitive expression, an expression that is always there, present in us, always teaching, 24/7. Whenever you tune in to it there it is, the beatific, beautiful spirit of enlightenment for you to tap into. That is the feeling that we want to cultivate.

I spoke about how visualization is a very different practice. Our minds are rusty when it comes to imagination; it feels a little daunting and weird because it is so foreign by now. For those of you that practice mindfulness, you know that when you get a good taste of it, it doesn't feel so weird anymore. But this practice is really different. What is it? It is not religion and it is not meditation; so what is it? What we are trying to do is to develop a connection to the qualities of those around us in a way that can inspire us, energize us, sustain us, make us feel connected to those qualities we want, and so make us feel empowered, energized. We are developing our minds to be receptive to that positive energy; and that energy is always out there. There are always people around with remarkable qualities, amazing beings all over the planet; you don't have to wait until Anderson Cooper announces this year's hero awards on CNN to find out who they are. What I mean is that at some level we don't know, we don't think that there are all these amazing people out there doing these amazing things. We are not tuned in to the "Buddha channel", like Thich Nhat Hanh calls

it. But there are. There are always people acting out of real enlightenment when something good needs to happen. And we all have it in us to do that, "I can do that, I am just doing it."

This practice helps us to tune into the Buddha channel. Don't worry if you don't understand everything that comes up as the actual practice goes, I told you last session that the first time I got into this kind of practice it took me a long time to start getting it. In any case, what we are going for is something that is a practical thing, and we need to do it, to practice. Consider it at this point as an experiment; the time we will be spending together we will be trying out this sort of intense flight simulator for a more enlightened way of being. We visualize that flight simulator as best we can, although it may soon be available, courtesy of our multimedia universe, as an app for our smartphone or our smart house or some other smart machine; we will have the Medicine Buddha app. Maybe Nalanda Institute will be the one to come up with it; if anyone wants to work on that app please let us know. But, for the time being, since we don't have the app yet, we have to use relatively low-tech ways, like the audiotapes that are available online, on our web site, for your use.

In the case of tantra we need to go much lower-tech, to the script, the performance script -- the '*sadhana*' -- that is included in the tantra practices to guide us in our practice, in our performance as we take on the role of a healthier, happier, more enlightened being. And we hope that by doing that, with some coaching and some mentoring and some templates, something will



catch on, the switch in our mind will flip and our energy will start moving in a different way. But it still may seem kind of weird. It's a bit like when you were in high school, and you sort of replaced your friends ...

How do we practice? We take the *sadhana* and we read it out. How do you read it? Let's talk a bit about the nuts and bolts of this practice. Like in other Buddhist practices, there is a good level of flexibility. You can do this anywhere; you can do it in the subway, or you can do it as a traditional sitting practice, on your cushion if you want to be really traditional. Books dealing with liberation should never touch the floor; so you should not put the text of the *sadhana* on the floor; if you are going to be really Tibetan about it, you put it on a cushion, a nice little bed, to keep it comfortable, as if it is a person, because it is a person, the form of a person, some special personal energy has gone into it ... Then you can just sit and recite the *sadhana*.

As you recite the *sadhana*, you should have an image of your chosen mentor, a Medicine Buddha for example, in front of you. You can download these images from the Nalanda website, or you can go find one, get one from Snow Lion; I hear Snow Lion is being bought by Wisdom Press. I am sure they will keep their wonderful inexpensive Thangkas, they are inexpensive and good, and that's the way of spiritual art. Or, you can paint the image of the mentor yourself, you can go to a class and learn to paint it yourself; whatever works for you.

Finding a real life person who you are going to use as your mentor is, of course, hard. But you can find a dozen people who each has a little bit of those special qualities and together they will have the whole lot, something like that. You can use anything you like, try different ways, and work with what works for you. And that openness is beautiful.

All these practices have an offering section, "I offer all these wonderful things to you, my mentor." Offerings may be real or imagined. I personally use plastic food and flowers at home because if you try to do this every day, refreshing the offerings every day, it gets to be a lot; you have to be a nun or a monk for that, otherwise you can't do it all the time. Even a little bowl of water can do the job, you can then imagine that the water is medicine, or healing lotion, or healing mouthwash, or foot wash ... The idea is that you do a little bit of magic, or you may call it a little bit of art. There are some props, and there are some things that you are going to try to substantiate; and you are going to be your own priest. Just like Baudelaire, who suggested we should all be our own priest.

You go through the performance script, the sadhana, you read it quietly and very thoughtfully, focusing on a line at a time, meditating at each line, or each phrase, or each segment. Or you can read it out loud, which is the traditional way. If you go to a monastery at 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning you will hear monks chanting. The chanting is very sweet and very cheerful, has beautiful energy. You can get some of that chanting online, for example there

is a wonderful CD of Tibetan chants by the nuns at Chuchikjall. They are really amazing to listen to, they transport you, you really feel like you are in a monastery, or a nunnery, when they recite these verses, because their practice is totally unfiltered and unproduced. It is incredibly sweet and also pure, very, very pure.

So, you can chant and enjoy the chanting process, or you can mumble under your breath, or you can just say the sadhana in your mind. All those options are open, try them all and it's your choice, take whichever you like.

That is the practice in very general terms. Now, there are certain segments of the practice where I think it is really good to stop and meditate. I would suggest that you stop at least after each passage and just try to take it in.

And how do you to revive your natural capacity to vividly imagine, have high-quality visualizations? You get the image you can and start working with it. Just sit there and look at the image, an image you have chosen because hopefully it is beautiful and you are mesmerized by it, sort of like a two-way mirror. Behind the two-way mirror is your mentor. Actually, what you are seeing in the mirror is your own ideal, your ideal nature, projected onto the mirror. What is happening is the process that you and your mentor are working on together to transform you into that perfect being -- what psychoanalysts would call your 'ego ideal', which we will get to in more detail later.

As you might sit and look at the image of the Medicine Buddha, try to focus intensely on one part of it, like the face. Close your eyes, and try to hold a

mental image of the face; then open them up and move them back to the image you have in front of you, and look at it again. Then close your eyes again and repeat the sequence, continue in this way. This is the way to study with visual imagery, it's like you are downloading the image on your brain. Most of what we call perception is generated by a kind of memory bank; a sort of a bank of images, a bank holding a stock of images. Our brain is full of stock images of things, and mostly of things not actually seen out there in the external world but just recycled stock images -- that's what the brain does for us. And that's what we are trying to do now for ourselves; we have to generate a new stock image of this particular form.

If you do not feel that comfortable with the Tibetan version of the Medicine Buddha, there are Westernized versions of it, Western artists are painting versions that look more Western and less Tibetan. I don't know if that matters to some people, it might make it a little less odd, more comfortable for making a connection. The main thing is to establish that personal connection. You focus on the face, then you focus on the hands, then you focus on the shoulders and the torso, you focus on the whole being together and then you go back to some arts; and you do a little bit at a time.

I am not suggesting that you *have* to do this, to practice this way. It is not necessary that you do it this way; but this is how it is done. There might be a more aesthetic way, the artist's way of doing it, something like you look at the image, do the artist thing and create something, and, hopefully, you end up

with a beautiful work of art that is inspiring and uplifting to you. So just try to take it in, and let it rock. Imagine the Buddha is right in front of you, or your mentor is right in front of you; you are having a personal dialogue and you get the feeling of his presence, or her presence, and then you close your eyes and imagine that you are in the presence of that being, you can see that in your mind's eye.

Now, I think that for most of us who are not professional meditators, or professional spiritual people, the better way to go about doing this is the gestalt way. You just get a vague impression, as if you are reading a novel. When you read a novel somehow you are all caught up in the world of the novel, but it's not like you actually see the details of the buildings that the characters are going into; you just have a general sense, "Oh, yeah, they went there, they are doing that, that's happening, this is happening..."

That is actually enough. All you have to have is the "suspension of disbelief" as Coleridge called it, the capacity to generate the feeling that this is really happening. "I am really encountering the Medicine Buddha as I speak here." That is the most important thing for you, to have the feeling that somebody else is there: "I'm not alone in this room, there is somebody else in the room with me; maybe he is in some time warp, through some time portal, space-time, whatever it is, I don't know where he's coming from, but here I am, skypeing with the Medicine Buddha, sort of."

That is the real feeling, that is the real magic, that is what you are going for, the feeling that it's really happening. The way this works is not because this

happens out there or in the imagination, but because of the psychological, emotional experience that happens between you and that vision, with all of the associations that are a part of it; and maybe on some level also, between some element of the fabric of space-time ... but let's just leave it at that.

For the rest of our session we will be focusing on the Medicine Buddha and on this practice; then at the end I'll give you a bit about the White Tara practice. The Medicine Buddha and the White Tara are the two basic practices that are generally used through all of the Tibetan schools. I mentioned earlier that in the next term Gelek Rinpoche will be giving the traditional blessing for the two practices, for those of you who want it.

Generally, before a practice, you try to get yourself in the mood; use music of that helps you, or incense, anything that works for you. But, again, in this particular tradition the chosen image is the real powerful source of mental stimulation.

There are opening prayers to these tantra practices; the more complicated the practice, the more opening prayers there are. Consider these prayers to be a warm-up. One that is especially good is the refuge formula "I take refuge in the Buddha, the Teaching, and the Community." Then there are various forms of refuge: refuge just for yourself, refuge for all living beings, and then there is tantric refuge. Let's take a look into refuge while we're at it, refuge is key in Buddhism and key for good tantra practice.

Personal refuge goes back to the Theravada tradition; the more general format is to go for refuge to the *three jewels*:

*I take refuge in the Buddha*

*I take refuge in the Dharma*

*I take refuge in the Sangha*

In Sanskrit it sounds much nicer -

*Buddham saranam gacchami*

*Dharmam saranam gacchami*

*Sangham saranam gacchami*

There is also a short form for those of you who are in a rush and are engaged in practices where if you have to do 100,000 of them, some people suggest:

*Namo Gurubya*

*Namo Buddhaya*

*Namo Dharmaya*

*Namo Sanghaya*

This is like saying *Namaste* in yoga, which means, "I bow to the deity in you." You could say, "Namo Buddha, Namo Dharma, Namo Sangha," that is a quick refuge formula.

Then you add a Mahayana formula, you say, "*by practicing the transcendent virtues may I become a Buddha for the benefit of all living*

beings." You are adding on to your commitment to help yourself, you are also committing to help others: "I am going for help for myself, and I am going to practice transcending my own limitations so that I can help the Buddhas reach out to all living beings."

In the tantric form the prayers are the same, with a couple of add-ons. You now add "quickly!" With tantra you are going to get to enlightenment more quickly: "May I become a Buddha, quickly," Also, it is usual to add your guru to the three jewels when you go for refuge. The formula of the traditional Tibetan form of refuge starts with the guru, not with the Buddha. The Buddha has second billing because, after the Buddha's death, how could his teachings be remembered if it weren't for the teachers? And so the teacher becomes revered, as the connecting link to the tradition. You say,

*Namo Gurubyah*

*Namo Buddhayah*

*Namo Dharmayah*

*Namo Sanghayah*

I take refuge in the Guru, or mentor, the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. So in tantra we have four refuges, not just the three jewels. And the role of the mentor is key, he is the personal presence of the embodied ideal way of being to which we aspire. The Buddha is dead, so we can have some kind of mystical



experience of meeting with the Buddha; or we can go an easier way, we can meet with someone else, someone who is a remarkable human being, who has been practicing for a long time and who embodies some Buddha qualities. The Medicine Buddha for example, Bhaishajya Guru. Bhaishajya is the Sanskrit word for 'medicine' and the name of this Medicine Buddha, whom I call the Healing Mentor, is actually the Medicine Guru. Guru is teacher, and the Medicine Guru is a role model that embodies all healers and all healing. That makes him a tantric form of the Healing Buddha.

Also included in tantra are the *four immeasurables*. We talked about them a little bit last year, when we talked about the lojong, the Mind-Clearing or Mind-Training practices. The *four immeasurables* are four positive emotions: love, compassion, joy and equanimity. There is a traditional formula you can say to cultivate each of them.

*'May all living beings have happiness and its causes*

*May all living beings be free from suffering and its causes*

*May all living beings never be separated from their true joy*

*May all living beings have equanimity that is undisturbed by any conditions'*

There are various forms of this prayer, and you could go on for quite a while on this topic. But this general form already has the key elements, so it is not necessary to go further here.

In the context of the *Sevenfold Offering* practice of role modeling, you can say that the first step, *admiration*, is a form of taking refuge. You can also call this step 'praise,' although what you are really doing is admiring the qualities and the way of being and you are trying to emulate them, trying to get close to them, with the help from the Medicine Buddha, the Mentor. You imagine that he appears as the "*Healing Mentor, the sum of all Enlightened Beings, Teachings and Communities throughout space and time.*" Because in the Tibetan tradition, the Healing Mentor is seen as the sum of all Buddhas, he contains all teachings, all communities. So we take refuge in all that: "*I take refuge in your example until I can embody your way of being and benefit all.*" This is a refuge in the Bodhisattva form.

The first two steps of the *Sevenfold Offering*, *admiring* and *welcoming*, are part of called the 'action practice' -- or the 'active process' as I like to call it -- that is related to the phase of idealization. This means that psychologically you are coming to the mentor as a parent, a better parent, an ideal parent, a better guide, a hero, a therapist, a God, an ideal.

This start is hard for those of us with a Western background, because we have sort of unlearned this hero mode, and we have learned the anti-hero mode, the mode of cynicism, the radical egalitarian going to the lowest common denominator. Looking at it from the future it's going to read back to us as, "Gee, should I really be doing that, isn't that kind of regressive?" Heinz

Hartman, who coined this famous formula for therapy, "regression in service of the ego" said that therapy works because we consciously choose to go back to our childhood and to be like children emotionally, at least for a few moments in the therapy session, in order to re-parent ourselves, in order to be able to do it all over again, and to figure out what happened, what went wrong, and undo it. In that sense we're doing the same here. This first step of *idealization* of another being is like a gateway to our re-experiencing and re-making of our self. We have to understand that when we are taking refuge in this way, we are idealizing the Mentor. As Gelek Rinpoche likes to say, you feel like "I want that" in a very aggressive sort of way, "I want that!!" Maybe you just want to be around that way of being, you just want to feel its presence; it's beautiful to be around it, it may be you want to bask in it and take its healing energy in. It may serve the purpose of going to church or something like that, like, "I want some help, Medicine Buddha, please heal me"; because in the beginning of this process it's more like, "I want some help, give me some, gimme gimme gimme." Or, maybe, "I want to be more like you."

Each of the seven steps has a function in the process, each is designed to overcome certain obstacles that get in the way of our really taking on this new being.

The first two steps that go into this active process are "admiring" and "welcoming." They are there to help us prepare, because we are not ready yet to deal with a complicated, intense, emotional relationship with our ideal. We

want to start simple, we want it peaceful, we just want to admire, and so that's how we begin. It's like we can only handle a certain level of closeness, like when you are gazing at someone who is really beautiful and attractive to you, but you're not ready to move closer. You know how that happens, you know somehow, you just get that hit, a buzz, and you go "whoa, isn't that amazing!" That's the kind of feedback, that is the energy that we need here. It's that little bit of energy that you feel, like a little buzz, from being around the Dalai Lama, or looking intently at a picture of the Medicine Buddha. We are feeding our heart in these two stages.

Let us talk about this in psychoanalytic terms for a little while, since we are all sort familiar with it. Freud said, "Regression in the service of the ego" what does that mean, and what does he mean by "ego"? He said that the ego is "the precipitate of abandoned object cathexis." What does that mean? I don't think Freud really expressed himself so poorly, I think his translator was off somewhere. The original, in German, is actually much more direct. In plain English, what does that mean? It means that the ego is created as a residue of love lost object. We grow by loving beings. Our body grows by eating food, our mind grows by eating information, our heart and our self grow by eating beings, so to speak -- or cannibalizing, in a matter of speech -- and that is by loving the living being that we love.

If you think about your life story; what are the phases in your life story? I bet if you look at the phases in your life story, they revolve around the people

that you love, they have been defined by them. You may have loved them as a parent; or you loved someone you loved to hate, you may have loved someone that you thought would save you and then turned out to torture you; you may love someone as a mentor ... You will notice that there are people that you love at certain points, whether it ends up being a positive relationship or a total disaster you barely survive. In every case you come out a different person at the other end; because you are a different person when you really love somebody. We become another person by loving. In fact, in psychoanalysis the phase that you move out of being a symbiotic being, that is, when you first become conscious of being a separate self from mother or whoever the caretaker is, that is when you choose which parent you love better, which parent you want to have for yours. That is the oedipal stage, the stage when you really become a separate person, as you are making a choice of who to love. I know that this is very sobering to hear.

Be that as it may, if that is the way we grow, that is what our ego is made of, love, of our love for others. Then the only way to grow as an ego, ego in the positive sense, is by loving more people. That is why therapy works, because, hopefully, we love our therapist. Therapists take care of us, they care for us, they listen to us and we listen to them -- and it's fun, when we have nothing else to do! It is a very simple and satisfying relationship, it works because it's mutual attention, and there is a real bond of love between the people involved.

The same is true of this practice. Gelek Rinpoche likes to say that what makes his practice move forward is affection, mutual affection between the people in the relationship.

When a baby is born it is all *Id*; literally '*Id*' in Latin means 'it', we begin this life as all 'it', it's total need. Then it starts to recognize the presence of people that satisfy its needs, that give pleasure. Those people get a special place in its view of the world because pleasure works; pleasure feels good. This is where we form the images of mom and dad, depending on how we perceive they satisfy our needs. Of course, the images are 'good mom' and 'good dad' when they provide me with pleasure; and they are 'bad mom' and 'bad dad' when they don't. Mom and dad are going to protect me forever and feed me, save me, make me whole; or maybe mom and dad are going to eat me up alive, or throw me in the oven. We all have both of these images -- and our minds have the capacity to make drama out of anything.

So there you have it, we have the good parent and the bad parent. The good parent is more attractive, it beckons us. "Who do you want to be?" In the mirror of the good parent we see our self reflected as the 'good me.' Psychoanalysts call this 'good me' the 'ego ideal', that part of the superego, that conscience part that goes, "mommy and daddy will be happy if I do this, they will not be happy if I do that." And "mommy and daddy will love me if I am like this" -- that is the ego ideal. Then of course, there are times for "they will hate me

if I am like that" -- that is sort of the 'bad me'; and that becomes a core shame self, a traumatized self.

Out of those early, primitive images of self and other, we choose to be either the "good me" who wants mommy's love or daddy's love, or the "bad me." We sort of act on this choice, and then we become a differentiated person, like other people. And so our egos were formed out of something that isn't quite an ego, what Freud called the superego.

Most of us walk around, like Freud said of our development, with a police squad stationed in our own mind. Because what we learn when we become very aware of whether mom and dad are happy with me is that we learn what pleases mom and dad. Especially if our parents are very stressed out, with our dependence on their love, we learn that, "I better behave and be quiet, better to live in fear because if I do the wrong thing they will hate me, and then I'll be toast, I'll be thrown out in the trash bin;" which is pretty scary for a helpless little kid.

The flip side is the ego ideal: "If I do the right thing I'll be good, I'll be golden, they will love me and so I will like myself and I will be kind, I will be a great being." That being makes little appearances in our lives here and there, but normally it is kind of under the gun, under the thumb of the superego, which stands looking over as the judge, the punitive conscience that says, "You are not quite good enough" or "you screwed up there, forget it, you are no ideal."

The purpose of this process is to take on again that old ideal that we had but no longer identify with because it's been too encumbered, by falling in love with people who have not been able to see us or mirror us as we needed. The image of the deity allows us to get back to our ego ideal, to the person that is totally adequate to win the love and approval of mom and dad, totally adequate because he or she deserves love and can be a totally self-sufficient ideal being. The image of the deity helps us to separate the ego ideal from all the tormented, conflicted, frightened, punitive -- and normal -- parts of our being. Then we develop a new relationship with the deity, the mentor deity, through this new being that is re-parenting our own self. That is kind of interesting. The psychology here is one of getting in touch with our primal sense of possibility. When we are kids our sense of possibility is enormous, we can be anything we choose. And then as we get older we start to see the possibilities disappearing, and we can barely look and recognize our self in the mirror. Where did it all go? It didn't go anywhere! We are the ones burying it all, burying all that possibility! How do we dig it up again? We dig it up through loving another, and, eventually, loving every living being.

So we find another being that is cool enough that we can really love, that we are really interested in. We just like being around them, we feel better around them, we feel more like ourselves, we feel more in touch with our better self in the presence of that other being. We like ourselves better and we are our better selves in the presence of that other being. That is the clue that we are



near somebody who could be a mentor, or something like a mentor. That is actually part of what makes that other being admirable to us, because "that other person helps me to like myself, to admire my own self again, because they bring out the best in me, because in their presence I can feel the possibility of being that ideal being that I gave up on a long time ago."

But, again, with the police squad gathered in the mind, in the beginning, it is not easy to get into the love thing; it is easier to taste it a bit, experience it from afar. Why do we have romance novels and Hollywood? It's easier to love somebody or something at a distance, or on a screen, or far away, or idealized as an object, than it is to love ourselves or any other real living being. This way also gratifies that need to keep it simple, let's not get encumbered with too much reality or too much negativity, just find somebody or something that we can really love. Once we get that, we have the fuel to start growing again. We can use that love to internalize, to really take in that role model that is the other person. Taking in that person allows our ego to grow in a good way; it allows our self to grow. This is the first of seven steps in the role modeling process, when we are really trying to pick ourselves up from our own bootstraps (*in this case our imaginary bootstraps*).

When we imagine that our mentor is appearing in the form of the Medicine Buddha, we can say that we are actually objectifying our mentor. We are taking a perfectly fine human being and we are dressing him up to suit our narcissism. We are trying to spruce him up and say to him, "you can re-make me,

totally, all over again; you are a Buddha, you can help me be that good person that I want to be." And the mentor is going along for the ride. Because he or she knows that, eventually, with enough support and feedback, I will figure it out, I will be able to see that it is okay for him or her to be a human being, and it's okay for me also, to be a human being.

But in the short-term there is no sense of the objectification, while there is the need to imagine the being as perfect, without any flaws, in order to find them lovable; that is the idealization stage. And we use our imagination to filter out any flaws, so that we can find our mentor lovable -- and that's how we do that.

This reminds me a very elegant study done by a nun, an Argentinean psychoanalyst nun called Ana María Rizzutto. She worked with children and she used art as a communication tool. She did this fairly rigorous longitudinal study with kids, she asked them to draw first an image of their own self, then an image of their parents, and then an image of God. What she discovered was that their images of God were very much like their parents, only better versions -- a little kinder, a little gentler. Her study was reviving St. Anselm, who lived in the eleventh century, and who said that God is "that than which nothing greater can be conceived." In other words, God is a concept of the greatest being we can imagine; this is sort of the portal, the departure point for what God is. God is better than *that* because God is, theoretically, greater than any other being ...

But the best being that we can imagine is a fantasy. Formulating him, or her, in that way, is already a departure, it is sort of indicating something.

From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, or from a human development perspective, what does all of this mean? We are all mammals. We are a very weird experiment of Nature in which we are made helpless, completely defenseless and completely dependent on other living beings. The only benefit, the only thing that we have to survive and to hold onto is mother, what we can learn from our mother, or our caretakers, and, eventually, from other living beings, or through them. The only thing that this proves is that we can learn socially. And that is what evolution is designed to do. Take the last 65 to 70 million years of evolution: what were they designed to accomplish? One thing they have accomplished is They have extended our learning phase, the phase in which we can learn from others, longer and longer, through our whole lifespan, our millions of years of evolution. This implies that the thing to do is to extend the network of people you can learn from, more and more.

What makes human beings human? For an answer we can ask, "What makes a monkey a monkey?" Monkeys can leave mother and they can belong to a troop. They have a social organization, they can learn skills from their parents, and they can learn from the other elders in the tribe also. That is what we humans do, and we do that to the nth degree! We can leave home, we can totally remake ourselves, re-parent ourselves with other living beings. The next question is, what is it that makes it possible for us to keep learning and

growing throughout our lifespan? It's that God ideal, the idea that there is a better parent out there. And we go looking for that ideal with much hunger and openness, which is so anti-modern, so opposed to our current, deconstructive, skeptical, cynical mentality. But it is so necessary for us to keep growing. We do have to keep taking more and more people in, in order to be true to ourselves. Not only as the only mammals that can totally learn how to live, starting from nothing, from scratch. We are the only mammals that can do that throughout our whole lives. We can totally reinvent our own self in our lifespan. This is really amazing, think of it, what an opportunity we have!

And what is limiting us from doing it? It is not recognizing that this capacity is in us. And that is part of what we are trying to reactivate, that part of us that can keep growing if only we can stop reappointing ordinary mom and dad as the police over our lives and instead we appoint a better mom and dad, or a different mom and dad, different role models to help us get beyond them and grow to the next level. It's that sense of ideal we are looking for here. In that context the objectification is a good thing. But we need to remember that the purpose is not that we stay with this ideal, because then we get stuck again. The real purpose is to get us to 'suspend disbelief', and to be open to another person. The purpose of the image of the Medicine Buddha is to help us be radically open to a healthier person. By establishing a relationship with the Medicine Buddha we get practice in what a good relationship is, a good and

healthy relationship, with a healthier person, a relationship that's going to transform us.

If icons don't work for you that's okay, you don't have to use the image of the Medicine Buddha, you can use any image that you like; you can use a real person if you want, the point is to use an image of an ideal that inspires you. The image is defined as an '*ista-devata*' that means the deity of your choice, or the archetype of your choice, an ideal being; you imagine an ideal being. It could be something you draw in art class; it doesn't have to be something Tibetan, or something religious; it just has to be a better way of being. If you can imagine it it's an image that will trigger inspiration, like Nature for poets, it's what art is all about. It's about using our imagination to grow outside of ourselves and get in contact with something else, a better way of being, somehow. When I teach these things at a hospital that is what I tell the participants. I don't guide them to imagine the Medicine Buddha, that's not the audience for the Buddhist iconography. Even with an image of an anti-hero there is the message, that we should accept it, or transcend it somehow. So use your own imagination, try different images, try them on for size and see what works for you. That's how these things were formed in the first place, when people started using their imagination for a better way of being, and they used the image as the base for building the ideal way of being.

All of this may sound a bit too abstract. But abstraction has a purpose, it is positive in a practical sense, because abstraction allows us not only to bridge,

but also to filter, to select what we want to keep and what we want to throw away so we end up with an image that is truly ideal; we can filter out the weaknesses and idiosyncrasies of the person we are using as a model so that we don't wind up in the same situation we had in loving our parents, or loving other people who were flawed, and so we ended up with a mishmash of conditions and traumas, taking in all kinds of garbage, their garbage, all of it, as if learning from them was a package deal.

This capacity for abstraction that we humans have protects us from disappointment, and from mis-learning. It is not just a matter of getting hurt when you love. It's also avoiding imitating or idealizing the defects of our loved ones, so you are not getting bad software, bad code; you are filtering out their bad code, you are debugging the person, filtering out the negative and filtering in the qualities that you know are good and that you want to envision within yourself and cultivate within yourself. So you see how important the act of abstraction is. It is filtering, and it's also distancing: "Just be my ideal please, don't be too human for me, I don't need another one of those ordinary human beings, I want a better version."

This is a powerful and interesting art; and it is not intuitive. It is very different from what we have come across before in this program. It is different as its elements are different from the other practices. To me this has the element of worship, the element of our infancy. For some of us that might seem like a no-no, not the way to go for becoming a better being, it might seem like something

undesirable. But actually, from the traditional point of view, and I believe from a psychological view, it's very important.

Why? Because we did worship our parents, or our caretakers. We were so helpless and powerless as children that we worshipped them, we depended on them, it's a fact, we had no choice. They were Gods, as our saviors, and that is why our images of them and our feelings about them still run our lives, because we worshipped them.

We need to worship something better. And we have to be careful of what we worship. This is very important. But this position for the need to worship may be harshly criticized, it clashes with the modern individualist, ego-centrist notion that "I'll just get out of this whole system by bringing everybody to the same level, the level of the anti-hero, the lowest common denominator, the screwed-up human, neurotic human being. Because there is a part of us that doesn't see or feel that way about our parents, and to some extent for good reason. But in fact our whole life depended on them, totally, for some years, and they really saved us, came through for us, many times. Where would we be without them? At times they may have driven us crazy. But we would not be here without them -- and that is not a small thing. But, more importantly, we have this experience, this aesthetic experience that is now engrained in our body of being so small and so helplessly dependent on other beings, beings who came to take care of our needs as much as they could, they came to

make the difference between our having happiness or unhappiness, survival or no survival. That is a powerful experience that runs through our lives.

Unless we go deep down to that level into our psyche and re-do our growing experience, we will always be run by our parents. That is why some people look at this art as regressive, and as potentially creating dependencies. But, as I have told you before, and as you will see time and again as we move forward, there are elements that have been built into the practice that are specifically designed to mitigate these negative effects.

To get a sense of what the ultimate aesthetic is here, take a look at some of the fierce deities that are part of the tantric tradition, some of the fiercer archetypes of wisdom or compassion, you will notice that they are very intense and strong, not little dependent creatures like we were as children. And our practice here is to imagine our own self as that deity, with those traits. That is an awesome being.

Another thing about the images of these fierce deities is that they are standing on what are stand-ins for our superego. That is where the mom and pop gods are, that is where those deities are standing on. It is the Gods that we made of our parents, and our ordinary Superego that thinks that we are small and that we have to be ever so careful, so watchful, that it keeps us living in fear and shame.

The other thing to point out in this idealization stage is that it's just opening the door. The purpose of this first stage is not to create a dependency



relationship; it's to get us moving, and we get moving by loving something, a better way of being, enough, that we actually start moving toward it. The proof of the pudding is in the seven steps of the *Sevenfold Offering*, in following where the steps lead. And as you follow you will find out that they don't lead to you idealizing the other person; they lead to you finding the deity that you admire in the other person, and becoming that deity -- that's where it leads.

And what about the comment that this mentor-apprentice relation practice is regressive? It is not regressive at all. Even if you take the culture as a whole you can see elements of it, and of course there are people who have regressive relationships with their Tibetan gurus, just like in every social group and in every culture, there are always people that have regressive and idealizing, worshipful relationships; and there are many Tibetans who have these kinds of relationships with their deities and their art forms.

Look at the structure of this practice and compare it to the structure of other practices. There is only one tradition in the West that is similar to this practice, and that is the imitation of Christ, which is a Jesuit tradition. The intention of this practice was to create radical warriors for the Church; in other words, knock-offs of Christ. They weren't trying to create Christians, they were not content with creating Christians. In a similar way, this tradition isn't interested in making Buddhists, it is interested in making Buddhas! That is what we are committing to be, right on page one, right up front, *"I am going to become a better being, an enlightened being, with your help."*

The idealization stage is also there to provide a little jump-start power, because we do need it. We surely don't know how to re-make our selves into Buddhas. We would like to be Buddhas but we don't know how. So here's the technology to do it, and it has to be communicated somehow.

I have a couple of other things I want to mention about Kohut's concept of the therapeutic relationship as a "transmuting internalization," which he sort of took on from Jung as an alchemical process in which the person is transmuted, a process in which his, or her, whole substance is transformed. This is also related to the Christian notion of "trans-substantiation", whereby a person is transformed through the relationship with the mentor, who acts as catalyst for that transformation. The idea behind "transmuting internalization" is that by taking in something in the presence of the other, some qualities, or some way of being, that the other has, the other person's own chemistry and constitution are transformed. This process of internalization in Western psychology is broken down into four stages: idealization, identification, internalization and integration. That is how I approach this seven-step practice, and also the four levels of tantric practice. The four steps are the yoga of modeling a more enlightened way of being, or a more altruistic way of being, with the guidance from a mentor who also provides a living model of that ideal.

Each of those four stages correspond to each of the four levels of tantra, commonly translated as action tantra, performance tantra, yoga tantra, and

highest yoga tantra. As we move forward we get closer to the ideal, we develop more and more capacity to tolerate and transform, and we deal with deeper and more intense passion. This is very much the same as the psychotherapeutic notion of using a relationship to transform our sense of self and our relationship with our nature, with our passions.

About sublimation, there is a specific way to practice sublimating destructive emotions into positive ones. We use our imagination, creatively. We imagine ourselves as Buddhas, loving Buddhas or fierce Buddhas, but in all cases the feeling inside is always like a Buddha full of love, openness and compassion. That is a way of using our imagination to integrate our aggression, if we are using a fierce Buddha as our image, for example, to cultivate our altruism and our positivity. In the same way, the sexual imagery in the tantras is designed to help us take our primitive instincts, with their powerful energy, and integrate them with our ideal sense of self. We will go over sublimation practices more next year; then we will be doing things following more what Jung believed.

The reason that Jung broke with Freud is that Freud didn't believe that humans could ever transform their aggressive energy into love energy. He believed that there was a certain amount of aggressive energy and a certain amount of love energy in every human being -- and never the twain shall meet. But Jung was more traditional, in the Christian sense, in that he believed that our aggressive, destructive emotions could be sublimated into positive energies and

emotions, and that our natures are fundamentally transformable, even to perfection.

This tradition is very much consistent with Jung's belief. In the case of tantra the sublimation is practiced by tapping into altered states of consciousness, or elevated states of mind-body, and reaching into the neural energy and chemistry that give us the capacity to re-wire our relationship with our primitive nature, to learn to recruit and subordinate the primitive elements of our instincts to more sociable elements, elements that have the sort of mammalian social stamp of approval on them.

The mammalian nervous system has certain built-in elements to stop us from using our destructive instincts for harming others who we recognize as kin. So what is it with all the violence around us? That is why to train as a warrior you have to think of the other people as evil, not human, but enemies, heathens. That is how you overcome that built-in barrier.

In Buddhism the thing to go for is to dissolve the barrier between "me" and "everyone else": we want to learn to recognize all living beings as kin. And in this practice we want to do it at the chemical level, we want to change the chemistry in our body, and that means to subordinate our entire primitive fight-flight-freeze nervous system (including the primitive functions of self-protection and the primitive chemistry of self-protection) to the higher chemistry that is more mammalian, designed to produce kinder, gentler versions of our aggressive self-protective instincts. In chemical terms that is reducing steroids

and such, and promoting oxytocin, or in lay terms the "cuddle hormone," and vasopressin, for example. This can be done by using certain chemical feedbacks from the smart vagus.

We have this potential to extend our unconscious, regulating and integrating cortex, and reach down to our most primitive functions. That is how some yogis can turn their thermostat down -- in fact they have been known, in carefully done experiments, to turn their metabolism down by 64 percent, a most amazing accomplishment. That means living on less than half the energy that we take to live normally. So, there we have a proof that we have that capacity to control those primitive functions. It's a question of athletic capacity and training that is required to re-wire ourselves.

It doesn't mean that because this kind of practice, this technology, has a very high-power application that we have to use it. We could take this technology and become Buddhas in ten years. Or we could wait until the next lifetime, and just use this technology to be calm and happy, and clearer about who we are. Actually, some of these practices are used for simple self-healing, for anxiety management, for psychological and social development, as well as for spiritual development.

The Medicine Buddha and the White Tara are beautiful practices for this purpose. They provide the same basic benefits as Mindfulness and Mind-Training. It doesn't have to get fancy to work for our benefit. I am introducing the fancy later for those of you might want to do that.

In any case, we should not get too far ahead of ourselves. We are, at some level, still looking for 'mommy'... My first analyst used to say that we are all little helpless kids inside, we all just feel like calling for mommy. I think there is a part of us that is still that helpless child; and we have to start our work of building our new self beginning with that child. It's more like we have to learn to calm our whacky neurotic inner child down, that's where we need to start. We can't get so far ahead of ourselves and so fancy, and fool ourselves that we are going to leapfrog to become Buddhas tomorrow. Anyway, we are all part of a culture where we have to make room, we have to expand our awareness and understand what our potential is.

I want to point out a couple of other things regarding the use of the structure of the *Sevenfold Offering* for learning how to tame our inner child, how to upgrade, educate our inner child. Each step has a particular function for overcoming the obstacles we find as we work in the process, what in modern psychotherapy we call, 'a transference analysis purpose'. And what are these obstacles?

One of the obstacles that we all have is a degree of fear, doubt, arrogance or grandiosity; this is very strong especially in modern Westerners. We have the attitude that we can do without religious culture, or traditional contemplative culture, or any culture that promotes kindness, that we can just throw it all out, it's just garbage. And we don't see the connection between this attitude and the fact that we are still unhappy despite living in the the richest,

safest, luckiest place on the planet; or the connection between this attitude and the fact that our levels of heart disease, cancer and addiction are higher than in much poorer countries. Studies now show that if we don't practice kindness, if we don't do the things that Sister Mary used to tell us to do, that makes us more frightened, more alienated and more unhealthy.

The first step, which is idealization, or admiring the deity of our choice (the Medicine Buddha, for example) is designed to tame that arrogant person inside of us that says, "Why should I admire you? I am better than you are, you are probably a phony, there are plenty of phonies, all around ..." It's that kind of scenario that dominates our culture. If you look at late night entertainment on TV that's all you find, it's about making fun of people, of everything. It's funny, I love it, I wouldn't want to do without it; I don't want to go back to church.

We have to overcome our sense of skepticism and doubt, overcome the feeling that we can't really trust anybody or anything, that we certainly are not going to idealize anyone or anything, we can't, because it's un-American, un-New York, here we challenge it all.

Because, with that attitude we are so fond of, it doesn't mean we didn't throw the baby out with the bath water. We did, we threw out the baby with the bath water. I say that because one of the basic values in spiritual or religious culture is the capacity to admire the good, admire the decent, old, traditional human qualities like sanity and kindness. But now, now we admire people that can trump the system; people that buy off the next company, fire half the

workers and make a lot of money in the process; or people that win on American Idol.

We need to realize that that skepticism, that small-mindedness, that notion that there isn't anybody better, anyone worth admiring because of their kindness and compassion, makes our society poor, unhealthy. Ongoing research is all pointing in that direction; we need to practice kindness, and patience, and other positive feelings, for our own health.

So we need to overcome such doubts, change our attitude, open up and learn the value of identifying with the qualities of the chosen deity, those qualities that we are now determined to develop. When you look at the Medicine Buddha, the sprig of aloe he has on his right hand is there as a symbol of the human capacity to master the physical reality for healing, which the Buddha is offering to us. The aloe is there to help us live well in a physical world. The aloe lives and grows and thrives in the physical world. The question is, do we want that capacity?

Again, the Buddha may not float your boat; maybe none of these images will float your boat. The point is that when you have a vision of your ideal self, the being that you really want to be, a better version of you, then you will be very clear and have no doubt about how these qualities make a better being, and a better life.

You need that belief because, in the Buddhist view, unlike in our traditional theistic religions, no one can do this for you. God is not there to do it



for you. Unless you get it right, which means unless you wish for the right thing and unless you pursue and realize it with all the right steps, you won't get there, to that better life, it won't work. Only I have the power to improve, to cultivate a better way of being for my self. But I have to envision, to imagine that ultimate reality, clearly, so that the vision will guide me through.

The first step of admiring, of *idealizing* another, is designed to overcome our fear of trusting another living being with our energy, our nature, our spirit; only then we can begin working on what has to happen in order for me to be like the other.

The second step is *welcoming*. Here we offer whatever is precious, beautiful. This is seen as very important also in Western positive psychology: generosity actually makes us feel better; giving things away is a good muscle to exercise. And in this tradition we get off easy, because our offering doesn't have to be physically real, we can just imagine it, we can imagine that we are giving everything to the Buddhas, giving our bodies and minds to the Buddhas. Practitioners say that we will get some benefit if we imagine vividly, to the point that it feels almost equal to actually giving away things -- although it may be better if we give something. The motivation is not to give stuff, but to offer our self, to get over the root of greed, to undo the clinging, the attachment to the self, this self protectiveness, this feeling that I hold on to this thing because I am holding on to 'me', I might need 'me.'

The ultimate generosity of this kind is being able to give up our self-protective control of our minds and bodies, and offer them to a better guide, a kind of consciousness, a mindset, a software that can better guide us to do with our body-mind better than we can on our own. The idea here is, "If you ran my body, that is, if Buddha awareness ran my body, my body would be much better off than if I did."

That is saying a lot, it is not so easy for us to say that, and we have to understand what we mean by it. The point of this second step of *welcoming* is to give of our self as generously as we possibly can, and in doing that we experience both a sense of letting go and of opening up. Also, we experience a sense of entitlement, like when you invite some friends over for dinner and you give them some snacks. Well, it's the same here, if you invite the Buddha to come and help you, you'd better give him something for it.

It's not that the Buddha needs anything from you. He is blissed out already. But your giving makes you feel connected. Just like when you give something to a friend, it creates a bond between you. Think of food sharing, one of the fundamental, most primitive forms of social behavior. That is what we are doing here, it's food sharing, and it is saying we are one body, we are kin, my food is your food, my life is your life.

By doing that we feel not only safer and more welcome, we also feel entitled. Once we feed our guests we feel entitled, to their company, to be entertained, or to talk to them, tell them what's on our mind, or whatever it is.

It is the same with the Buddhas: once we offer something to them we feel entitled to ask for something in return. That is part of the reason why this step of welcoming is there; it is there to help us overcome our sense of insecurity or shame, which are obstacles on our path.

So, these steps have a very immediate, functional purpose, to make us able to ask for the help we need. Now, how can we be precise, and how precise can we be, about the qualities that we admire in one of these visualization practices?" There are many commentaries that go through all of the iconography and spell out all the qualities that are included in each of these practices, and you can either sign up for all of them or not. In the case of the Buddha, being in a monk's robes represents his perfect renunciation. Having a Buddha body represents perfecting our compassion and altruism. Those qualities are generic to most Buddhas.

To wrap up, you don't have to practice at home as homework. But if you want to, you can use the visualizations that are available online in the Nalanda web site. There are audio versions, written versions; or just do your regular mindfulness meditation, and come and learn about this just as part of a liberal arts program. You don't have to become a visualizer if it doesn't work for you and there is something else you want to do; that is fine. It is good to learn about these things that can be powerful and helpful, that might come in handy at some point, even if you are not going to practice them right away, or regularly.

## Chapter Four

### Disclosing and Enjoying: The Performance Stage of Identification

To begin, I'd like to return to some of what I felt were interesting twists and turns we went through in our last discussion. A couple of things came up as we were diving into the practice of the Medicine Buddha that I want to go back to. Admittedly, it's a simple practice, but we are exploring it in an advanced way ... We are always thinking too much, learning and trying to figure too much out, it's our human way. That is the Western sensibility, or the scientific mind, it's certainly the Nalanda approach.

A question that comes up often is, "Why do this practice?" For most people in both the West and in the East, when we think of meditation we think of calm, peace and quiet. This does not mean necessarily staring at my navel, going into my little cave, or maybe my isolation tank, into myself and my space. That's an important kind of meditation that is part of the mindfulness practice, what they call Shamatha, or pacifying, quiescence meditation. These are basic training practices. The question is, why should we do all these complicated visualizing practices, why should we imagine some foreign, non-Westerner, unfamiliar image, or anything at all? What is the purpose of that? Isn't this just an attempt to brainwash ourselves? What are we trying to do here, making things complicated when we really want them to be simpler?

If you remember, those of you who have been through the whole sweep of this program so far, in the first two years we talked about the *gradual path* that is laid out in this tradition, a path that begins with, first, learning to stop the cycle of stress and violence using very simple calming, quieting practices. And at the beginning that is what we all want, that's what we all think of as meditation, and that is where it all really starts. It's learning that we have the power if we stop and focus our minds to bring a moment of peace and clarity to where, before that moment, there was only a buzzing, blooming confusion, engines of wheels spinning on self-affliction, or self-destruction, or whatever.

That is the first foundation: bringing peace to the parts of our mind and body where there is no peace, and learning how to let go of the destructive energies that are in our system. That requires a very simple practice, like basic Hatha yoga, or basic mindfulness meditation.

Then we talked about what seemed perhaps the next logical thing to do: "Maybe I should drop out and become a nun or a monk; or maybe go for one of those long retreats that they do at the Insight Meditation Society up in Barre, do a six-month retreat or a three-month retreat ..." I guess you would have to have good friends to pay the bills while you were away!... The idea there is that we think we can find enlightenment and the peace that we are looking for outside, in the world, some place else, apart. But most of us decide to stay in the world, either because we just like it, or we don't want to leave, we want to find out what happens in the next episode, we don't want to leave the whole thing

as it stands -- in fact we want it all to work out well in the end, we want other people to be happy, we want things to work out, we don't want to just walk away, we don't have the temperament to just walk away.

We should all develop the capacity to walk away when we absolutely need to, because it is a useful capacity to have. But, in this case, with these practices, once you've got it, then, as they say, what you need to do is engage, and find a better way to engage.

The better way to engage is to not by just building peace of mind, openness, clarity and freedom of mind, spacious mind. We love all that. But it is not enough. We need to build the capacity to embody positive qualities of engagement, positive ways of engaging with others -- with good intentions, positive emotions and feelings toward others, or at least with tolerance, and some sense of safety and trust. Then comes learning how to embody ways of being, speaking, and acting in general, that are peaceful and yet effective. This involves learning a kind of caring skills, wise compassion, tough love, or just nurturing love.

If we are going to stay in the world we want it to be in a way that is sustainable in the longer term, we don't want to just keep going on with our regular twenty-first century lifestyle, from stress to stress and trauma, from the frying pan into the fire -- or, like in this case, we go from the garden into the fire! We need to have our meditation practice, and when we are in meditation we learn not just to reach deep peace and open space, but we learn also how to

prepare ourselves to re-enter from meditation into the external world with greater tolerance, resilience, acceptance and engagement. That is a quality not so much of the mind, but of the body. You can't fake that. If people make you angry, they make you angry. As Sartre said, "Hell is other people."

In Buddhism, the counter straw to that is, "Heaven is other people, and it is everywhere else." We make these realities together and it's up to each of us, in how we engage with other people, that experiences become either heavenly or hellish. On the one hand, if we care we are in the God realms, the heavenly realms of the boundless emotions; on the other, if we feel threatened and react with self-protection, panic or violence, then we are in the Hell realms, or the ghost realms. Where would you rather be? And so it is really important that we train ourselves to embody wellbeing, kindness and compassion.

That is what we are doing here. And we are learning the fast track, by using our imagination to envision a better way of being -- and that speeds our development towards a better way of being.

Just as when we were growing up we learned from our parents how to carry on in life, how to be the neurotic people we are, now, with this type of practice, we try to find a new way to re-parent ourselves. What seems like a complicated practice invoking a mentor is really about putting ourselves in a position not unlike a parent, and then learning how to re-birth ourselves, to have that parent, that mother or father, come into us and give us their blessing, their example, their secret mojo. And so we learn how to make that our own, and

then go on as a new person with a new approach to life, a new way of being in the world. The mentoring is the essence of this kind of practice. And visualizing the mentor is very effective in speeding up our learning.

If we follow this tradition we use imagery. In other traditions they use other things, like mantras in the Hindu tradition. But the devotion for your guru is very much a part of the Tantric Hindu traditions just as it is bonding with a mentor in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The point is not that we follow somebody else around and that we have somebody else to tell us what to do. What is important is that if we want to transform, we need to use the right tool for the job, and that tool is a relationship. That is what made us who we are in the first place, as children, through our child-parent relationship. And that's what makes us who we are going to become. If we want to really transform for the better we need a better relationship, that is the natural crucible and the natural way to do it.

Some of you are familiar with hypnosis. Is this like hypnosis? The short answer is yes, but only in some ways. It is very much like hypnosis in the sense that both use altered states of consciousness to speak to the deeper mind and influence changes in unconscious patterns that otherwise would remain unconscious, because such patterns cannot be touched by my saying something to myself, or through some intellectual learning.



Now, what is different, of course, is that this is a shared hypnotic experience, in the sense that both mentor and student are going together into a trance. It's not all one-way, like the hypnotist is influencing me; we are both going into it together. And it's not just a trance, and it's not about suggestion, which is how hypnosis works. The hypnotist says to the guy who is there for treatment to quit smoking, "In three months when you wake up you are never going to want to have another cigarette again!" or something like that. In this case it's more about priming a kind of modeling and learning. And a key to that is that we are not just trying to learn one new little thing or unlearn one habit, we are trying to learn a whole new way of being -- and that is why we focus on a person's image, what in the schema therapy or cognitive therapy they would call a 'person schema', that is a model, or as Dan Siegel calls it, a 'you-map.' We get a 'you-map' of a person, and we turn into an 'I-map.' And that is one major thing that makes this practice very different from hypnosis.

Here we are trying to change not just a peripheral habit of some kind, we are trying to change the 'mother of all habits', which is 'me', the 'me-habit', the 'who I think I am and what the heck I think I am doing' habit. That is why we need the image of a person, because that is where that habit lives. We learn how to talk and act by watching mommy -- just like the ducklings that followed Konrad Lorenz feeling he was their mother. We are watching mommy and as we watch we learn. We can't outgrow our nature, but we can learn to use it skillfully.

The other thing that I want to mention because it is very relevant here is recent research on the vagal nerve, and on facial recognition, which is linked to emotion. I don't know if anyone has been following this health psychology trend, one of the biggest hot topics, which is emotions. We have emotional intelligence, emotional brain, emotional this or that. Some of this research is on how emotions are connected to our bodies. There are studies on how, when our bodies are in certain postures, we are likely to experience certain emotions; and, by the same token, as we enter into certain emotional states we tend to affect the way we hold ourselves in our bodies. One of the ways that yoga works, as some of you may have experienced, is that by changing the way our bodies move we change the state of our minds.

A key aspect for tuning into emotions is this notion of facial recognition. The psychologist Paul Ekman and a couple of other people have done very interesting research in this field. They have come to recognize that when we meet another mammal and we are trying to decide if this is a safe mammal, whether this is a friend or an enemy, whether this is 'one of me' or 'one against me,' a predator, we are using our mirror neurons, which work basically as a kin recognition system. We try to recognize the familiar, we try to read the body language to figure out whether this is a friendly person or a scary person, whether someone is mad at us or not. Is this a good mommy or a bad mommy? Facial recognition is really important. And training in compassion helps a person

read the emotions that others are experiencing by looking at their facial expressions.

What we are trying to do in this practice is to sort of trick our normal empathic system and our normal facial recognition system by always having in our mind the image of the most reassuring, inspiring, caring and nurturing person we could possibly meet. Why? Because in the presence of such a person we are bound to be our best selves -- and that is from the Buddhist and the psychological points of view. In the presence of such a being I feel safe and secure, empowered, recognized. And so I am going to be at my best, I am going to be at my '*ego ideal*' slot. Having such a positive image in my mind is like having the adoring mother or father adoring us, caring and protecting us, and we won't be threatened, we'll be our ideal self, our *ego ideal*.

The idea here is the same as in the lab experiment we talked about the other day, that you see the color green when they are shining a red light into your retina because you were exposed to the word "green" beforehand. Here, if you imagine a loving person when somebody is growling at you, you are actually going to be less reactive to the anger coming to you. You are actually going to see and read the situation differently, more realistically: "Oh that's my friend who is in a really bad mood today, a really foul mood." Basically, what this is doing for you is protecting you from flipping into an anti-social response, an angry response to that person, because in one way or another you are feeling that's a predator, "That thing is going to eat me so I have no empathy, I

am shutting off the empathy system, I am shutting off the negotiation system, I am going into fight-or-flight mode, bye-bye..." This gives you a way of overriding that impulse to react to anger with anger, and of keeping us socially engaged.

As part of this practice, oddly enough, we don't just imagine our mentor as a Buddha, we don't just imagine that "I am a Buddha", we imagine that every living being we meet is a Buddha. We treat every living being as a sacred being, a vessel of ultimate awareness to whom we make offerings. That's part of the training for Tibetan doctors, for example, and the practice in this case is to see your patients as deities, and your medicine is like offerings to them. This is just a little different from our medical system ...

There is another interesting aspect to this, about the vagal nerve. We cannot control the normal part of the vagal nerve, the part that controls our breathing, our diaphragm, our digestion, our excretion, our reproduction, ... we can't control these things, at least not off-the-bat, breathing just happens, for us. But, as I mentioned to you before, we mammals developed a special branch of the vagal nerve, called the smart vagus -- and that we can consciously control. The smart vagus is the part of our nervous system that allows us to prepare to use our social brain. It is the social engagement system, as Stephen Porges, the premier researcher of the vagal nerve, refers to it. I think he will be famous soon because he is doing amazing work. He is studying the smart vagus and the way in which it affects our body and our brain as a social engagement system, the

system we developed in order to eat and breathe relationships, rather than air or water. Relationships is where we live, it is the water we drink to live.

Why do we learn to focus on our breath, over and over again, in all meditative systems? The smart vagus shares a nucleus with the old vagus, they are connected. With the breath we can affect the nervous system, which in turn affects how we feel. When we slow down our breath, we are essentially sending a neural message down to the vagal nerve to calm down. There are several other nuclei in the brainstem that used to control muscles where the gills were when we were fish. Since then we have evolved as aquatic animals, then amphibians and reptiles, then aquatic mammals, and now it's us, with our face, our ears, our tongue, mouths ... and all these muscles in our face. The reality is that our smart vagus, our conscious joystick for controlling our autonomic nervous system, also connects and interacts with the auditory nerve and the facial nerve. This is why when we are happy and smiling, or when we are saying something pleasant, or when we are singing, we calm down, because internuclear neurons are sending messages that make our face move this way, saying, "Hey, I'm happy, so calm down." The same thing happens when we see other people with a happy expression, or we hear a person with a soothing tone of voice, or we see somebody move in a gentle and reassuring way -- it makes us happy, it tells our vagal nerve, "You can calm down now, we are all mammals here, this isn't a predator, this is kin; among kin we share food, we share information."

Training our system to constantly visualize the image of a person who is reassuring to us, keeping that person in mind, and then learning how to be that reassuring person ourselves, which is all part of the practice we are learning here, is another way to stimulate the smart vagal nerve. To be able to change and adapt in this world we need to have our social engagement system (which operates thanks to the vagus nerve) working and in good shape. And all these fancy and complicated visualizations, the mantras, and the beautiful hand gestures that are taught in this tradition are all affirmations, designed to teach our body's nervous system to work better for us. But not so much our minds. Our minds may already think more realistically, but our bodies need to do it and feel it, and they need this information to learn it.

Many somatic therapies use visualization; in fact, EMDR (eye movement desensitization reprocessing) therapy is one of the most effective therapies for trauma, a lot of people who work with trauma are using it. And that is because they are effective in speaking to our deeper nervous system, that part of the nervous system that is hyper-activated in the case of trauma. Whatever the mind is saying, whatever people are saying -- "calm down, the emergency is over, the war is over, what are you so uptight about?" -- our bodies are often telling us, "You are in danger, something terrible is about to happen to you." If you need to help somebody in this situation, unless you speak to their body and

you stop those messages the person can't actually calm down and get out of the crisis, because their body is telling them that it's a life or death crisis.

All of us are caught in some version of this. Because when we are triggered into stress we feel alone, helpless. Our social engagement system is not always up and running, as we all know.

Why is it that with certain people we have that trigger and with other people we don't, and that includes people we know, and also strangers, and patients? For the answer we need to go back to basic psychoanalysis, to transference. Our emotional brain is a very simple processor, it wants to know who is who. And the cast of characters in the who's who, in the script of our life, is basically mommy, daddy, uncle, aunt, grandma, grandpa – it's the people that we met in the first six years of our life who had a consistent, repeated influence on our developing nervous system, the characters that have places in that little chess board that is our world. Later, as we go through life we may get to know people and do all kinds of interesting things. But our emotional mind is not interested in that. Our emotional mind is simply interested in typecasting people: "Are you my mother? Are you my father? Are you my good mother, my bad mother? My good father, my bad father? Are you my uncle, my aunt? We typecast people based on their signature and what it is closest to in our cast of characters, like a computer recognition software, used for mapping, for building our social and personal recognition system. That is how our brains work. And that is what transference is, in Western psychology: I recognize you to be this

person when you say this, or when you move that way, and so I respond to you with a particular program, one based on my past experiences and cast of characters. That program can be completely wrong; but it is my emotional brain that is functioning, that is reacting, doing the choosing -- hopefully in a state of a happy cat, although more often than not it is not so happy. And unless I reprogram that cat, it is not going to react differently.

So, when we want to cultivate compassion, we envision the people we have difficulty with, and we reprogram our attitude towards them. We begin by focusing on "the difficult cases" as we learned last year in the *mind clearing*, or *mind training*, practices. We meditate on the hard cases, on the social interaction for which our tools were obviously not well matched. We move forward "with investigation and analysis" to quote the Seven-Point Mind Training we studied last year. We try to figure out what went wrong and reprogram our self so that next time we face a similar situation we don't get stuck in the same pattern. Usually the problem is one of transference: I got triggered and I reacted with my traumatic self, and so the whole thing went badly. This is the way we think about this in Western terms.

In Buddhist terms, we think about this behavior in terms of self-indulgence: our self-indulgent mind took over, or our self-pitying mind took over. You can make translations between these different languages. So, we can use the *mind training*, or *mind clearing*, practice to go over difficult interactions with people, and we learn to retrain our minds, we find new alternatives to respond to



situations where our responses are counter-productive. We relearn, we don't keep repeating the same counter-productive action.

We can use an inspirational image to relearn, as we have seen; but we don't have to. We can just meditate on the people that are cool, that inspire us, like Thich Naht Hanh, or the Dalai Lama. Jack Kornfield advises trying to solve the problem you are facing as if you were a person who you know can deal with it well. And you meditate on that, on what actions they would take. This is a very simple way of doing this, it doesn't involve any imagery. And you keep scoring up every time you deal with that person, every time you deal with that situation, and instead of using the 'you' program, to use Dan Siegel's language, you use the 'another person' program. You go into your difficult interaction with your Inspiring image, say your boss, as Thich Naht Hanh. You will be able to stay cool, because you are not you, you are Thich Naht Hanh, you are the calm person on the boat; you are kind, you are gentle, you are wise.

This is an enhanced way of retraining your self. You don't just try on another person for size for a few minutes, you actually take in another person, in the same way you would your parents, or your early life mentors. And in this way you fundamentally transform the basic grid of your person system.

This way however, may not be so easy for everyone. One reason why the images are useful as meditation tools is because it's hard for many people to imagine themselves as any other person. If I look in the mirror I don't see Thich Naht Hahn. Maybe I can see my uncle Johnny, or maybe I see little flashes of my

father or my mother or my sister; but I don't see Thich Naht Hanh. But if I am imagining myself as a Buddha, and I imagine Thich Naht Hanh as a Buddha, then I have a link, a linking system, a *transitional object* in Western psychology terms. That is an object that is imbued with the soothing qualities of the parent and then is brought into my field, or into my ownership and possession, and it brings with it those good qualities, just like a talisman.

This is a kind of magic. And magic, they say in Buddhist psychology, is just concentration. So we don't have to be afraid of it. When we focus our minds they can do magic, they can do amazing things, seemingly impossible things. And when we focus on being another being, we can bring out capacities that we didn't know were there, in us. It's much easier to do that if we have a replica of that person that is generic enough that we can actually use it like a skin graft. When we are transplanting another self I often call the new self that we are trying to emulate a *prosthetic self*. One of the problems with grafts is that you get an internal reaction, and you start fighting with it, because it's foreign. So the way to do this is to download a model that's not too foreign, not too far out but more a sort of generic human. Then the mind is less likely to react and reject the graft, because "That's not me."

Psychologically speaking, this works in a very sophisticated way. I will not try to explain every detail of it, not that I can or that it would be desirable. But, again, I think that it is helpful for us to understand that this isn't just some sort of strange cult from Tibet. Maybe it grew out of cult practices in ancient India

somewhere. But then it changed, and it became a civilized shamanistic practice, a very fundamentally enlightened healing practice, over the course of several millennia. And so it comes to us, as an extremely sophisticated and refined software for transforming our minds.

A frequently asked question is, don't we need a self-protective response in the world to get by with difficult people? The answer to that is no, we really don't need it. Here we are confusing primitive, legitimate self-protective mechanisms with violent reactions for assertiveness.

Try to remember the last time you dealt with your most impossible relative. you know that the feeling is different from dealing with somebody that you feel fundamentally threatened by, someone you don't even recognize as kin. When you deal with a relative, your child, your mother or father or spouse who is enraged at you, because of some difficult delusion that they can't get out of their mind, or some ridiculous self-destructive behavior they can't let go of, what do you do? You don't go at them with all your guns blazing! That is not the right tool for the job, usually it doesn't work well, it just produces more of the same. What is the alternative? It's not that you roll over and do nice-nice and send gentle love and compassion with difficult problems. There are tools in this system for what I call *tough love*, or *fierce compassion*. For example, there is Yamantaka, the fierce form of Manjushri, the archetype for wisdom. Bob Thurman likes to translate him as "The Death Terminator, " meaning the one that kills death. Yamantaka has the head of a bull, nine faces, 34 arms and 16 legs.

He's called upon to "tame the hard to tame." Yamantaka is not a timid creature. He is said to be a form, a method tantra for transforming an affliction, like anger, into something useful, like enlightened assertiveness.

Enlightened assertiveness can be very awesome. They say that when someone filled with malicious intent sees Yamantaka, they drop their weapons, that's how awesome he is! I have been quite fascinated with this archetype, for a variety of reasons. One is that you find him in many forms, all over, at different times in history. For example, there is a Western version of Yamantaka in the *matador* in Spanish bullfights. There are other versions in the Mithraic myths and legends of the Persians. The bull must have been the most fierce domesticated animal.

And who can tame the bull?... How do you tame a bull? You have to have courage. And you have to use your intelligence and stay connected to the animal, and not be afraid. And you don't relate to it as an animal to another animal; if you do that you are going to lose because it is a tougher animal than you are. This is where all the Kung-Fu traditions of the world come from. You stay connected. This connected form of assertiveness is fundamentally coming from a place inside you, a place of empathy, empathy and knowing, very clearly, that that animal -- or person, as the case may be -- is being driven by violence. Then the question is, how can I disarm that? How can I work skillfully with that? How do I see to it that it does as little harm as is possible?

The bull is not what we think of normally as a kinder, gentler being; but it is, actually. It reminds me of a fascinating study that I probably have mentioned to most of you already. A retrospective study was done of a vast number of male inmates in Texas prisons, comparing them to a similar set of matching controls who managed to stay out of prison. The point was to identify the difference between the guys who ended up in prison and the guys who didn't. The researchers performed exhaustive MMPI's (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory) and some other tests. And it turns out that one developmental situation that was common to the people who stayed out of prison was what they had the opportunity for so-called 'rough and tumble play.'

What is rough and tumble play? That is how boys learn from their fathers or their brothers, maybe also their sisters, how to play rough in a fair and friendly way. That is what you get when you see kittens playing, like our kittens when we got them; and now they are even more ferocious than when we first got them. They chase each other around the house, snarling. There's no blood drawn and they are having fun, they kind of lose track at times but nobody gets hurt. The same thing goes on in the football field; it's a social activity, it's aggression socialized.

The smart vagus is not just capable of controlling the vagal nerve, it is also capable of modulating the sympathetic nervous system, by triggering the secretion of vasopressin. Just like oxytocin is the 'cuddle hormone', that is the mammalian hormone that tells the vagal nerve's parasympathetic system to

relax and be nurturing, sweet and fuzzy, vasopressin is the mammalian hormone that tells the sympathetic system to go ahead and fight, but be friendly, fight fair, have a good time, don't hurt anyone.

That capacity to be assertive, to use your sympathetic system with intelligence, not in the same mode of primitive reactive violence but in a mammalian mode, *that* is being fundamentally engaged and confronting the other with a positive sense of self, with a sense that is guided with empathy and connectedness. That is part of the skills set that we need to learn, develop and nurture. It's not enough learning to just be nice, we have to learn how to be tough also, but in a totally different way, in a non-violent way.

Jung and some of his followers talked about how humans begin to project their ideals to other beings and people in the external world, and then engage them in a process to internalize them, or their qualities. The change does not happen just because we want to. We need to externalize it before we can bring it in, because we don't yet know what to do with it. We don't know how to do it. Think of your early idols. When I was a boy I saw Burt Lancaster in the movie "Geronimo" and I thought, "Wow, he is so cool." I had to go out and get a pair of black jeans because he wore black jeans, and I thought that would make me a man, just like Burt, brave, and I admired that. But that was not enough, I didn't know quite how to do it yet, I was still shy. By idealizing him, I was able to bring the qualities that make him appear ideal a little step closer, more focused, see more clearly what he's got that I need. And keeping him close, eventually, his

qualities will rub off on me, or something like that. Wearing the black jeans that he wore is a way of identifying, gaining assertiveness, 'maybe I am not so different.' This is the way that social learning occurs.

There is one other catching-up piece that we need to work on here, about the second step in the process of the *Sevenfold Offering*, which is 'welcoming' -- and traditionally called 'offering.' I try to use the more psychological terms and the not so religious or spiritual terms, because that is the way we like to teach, to get the psychological truth of it; if you like the spiritual flavor better, then use the spiritual language.

Offerings are very important here. I want to give you a sense of the very subtle and elegant way that these traditions have thought about the art of generosity. Remember, as I mentioned last week, food sharing is one of the primary mammal activities. This is what makes a family a family, "I share with you." You are trying to bond this person to you and you admire and welcome him, or her, "Aren't you awesome, who are you and where do you come from?"

One Zen Koan, by the teacher Pai-chang, opens, "*Magnificent and imposing where do you come from?*" The reply from his student Huang Po, is "*Magnificent and imposing I come from the mountains.*" The mountains here stand for meditation; he's been meditating.

So the first step is you admire that magnificent, imposing creature. And then you want to bring her, or him, closer; and you offer whatever you have. Within the offerings scheme there are said to be many things to offer and many

different ways to offer them. There are inner offerings and outer offerings, and other types of offerings. Let us go through them.

Outer offerings are real things, like a flower, a fruit, a candle or incense that you light up, or music that you are play. “Hey, what do you think about this, how do you like this, I like this incense do you?” You are trying to sort of make it real. And in the process you are stimulating your own senses. Again, you are going back to the mammalian point, to the act of sharing. You are psychically tricking your mind to feeling like that person is present, and you are sharing this experience with him, or her. Who is familiar with "The Velveteen Rabbit" , read it as a child? The Velveteen Rabbit is a perfect example of how this practice works. It's a story about a little stuffed rabbit that is given as a present to a little girl. And she takes care of him, she takes to stroking it and giving it tender loving care, and after a while, the story goes, she stroked it so much it became alive, a real rabbit. That is the way this practice goes.

You think first, “What is this ridiculous thing; I'm envisioning this Buddha in front of me and I am saying, Om Buddha, I do this, do that, say mantras”, and you do it over again and you think, “What am I, crazy? this isn't like the Dalai Lama coming to visit me ...” But then, six months later, the Dalai Lama is coming to visit you. And you get this feeling, like, “This is real, something real is happening here, how does that happen?”

The real-life side of the story of the Velveteen Rabbit is the story of Mark Rosenzweig, a psychologist and brain research scientist who brought some lab



rats to his daughter, and she raised the rats at home, petting them and caring for them. And they became ten times smarter than the rats in the lab. And so we learned about enriched environments, and their positive effects on the brain, from this little girl and the rats that her father brought home.

That's how the brain works; if you stimulate the experience of this being as a real presence, you will have that experience. And the Dalai Lama is present, he's just on the other side of the planet, but he is here, he's in the same time frame.

Then there are the inner offerings. Inner offerings are living things within us. For example, if we imagine something beautiful, that is an inner offering. If we offer ourselves, our bodies, our minds, our spirit, those are inner offerings, inner in the sense of living, or human, conscious, animate.

Then there is the secret offering. That is our bliss. Joseph Campbell, another follower of Carl Jung, said, 'follow your bliss.' In this case, find your bliss and give it to your mentor, share it with your mentor and it will connect you, and then you'll find it in the mirror of that relationship, sharing bliss.

Then there is the suchness offering. What is that? 'Suchness' as a word doesn't exist in English. Sometimes it is called 'thusness.' It's just a translation for a Sanskrit word that means 'reality.' In Sanskrit there are two words for reality. 'Tatha' is the word for that hard, cold reality that is that out there; 'Tatha' -- you can hear it. Then there is 'Tathata,' the inner experienced reality; how does that feel? Tathata is the experienced reality, reality as the Buddha experienced it;

suchness, thusness -- it feels thus. Suchness is your feeling about reality, your sense of reality, your best guess of what the real truth, Truth, is. And you offer: "This is my best guess, this is my clearest purest mind, this is my most enlightened awareness; here it is, what do you think, how do you like it?" It's that kind of offering. It's like a philosophical offering.

I am not done yet, this is amazing! ... Not that you should do all these things, but I want to give you a flavor for this art. Because this is art, it's an art form.

The next offering is a mandala offering. Here you offer the whole world. You are offering not just your body and mind, but everything that is precious, everything you can imagine that is precious, and everything that you can feel or experience as precious, and everything you know or sense, including your bliss, you are offering the whole world with its continents, its oceans, its mountain ranges, its gardens, its precious places, its gems, all the people that live there; you are offering it *all* to your mentor. "Here, this is my world, take it, it's yours, what should we do with it? Help me figure out what to do with this, my world."

That's not all of it yet. Then comes the Samantabhadra offering. This is like William Blake's poem, "To See The World" –

*'To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,*

*And eternity in an hour...'*

Samantabhadra is an altruist, someone who is all good, everything is good for Samantabhadra. Why? Everything is good for him because he believes, or he experiences, that every atom within his being is a universe, which he offers to the Buddhas; and he offers his awareness of the Buddhas to enter into it. He also offers every atom in the universe around him. This is a quantum offering, it's a subtle essence, "Here, take this, the microscopic universe, see what you can do with that."

And so I bring all these offerings, I share all those things...

I don't know if you will go ahead with these kinds of practices. If you do you certainly will hear more about all these offerings. Here the point is, I think, we should know about all the things that we have to offer that we didn't know we had.

We move now to the next step, from '*welcoming*', to '*disclosing*', traditionally called '*confession*.' How are they connected, relate to each other? Welcoming is sharing positive things: "Here are all these wonderful things, have them." Disclosing, or confessing, is sharing negative things: "You see what a horrible a person I am, you see what I did, you see how I screwed up and I'm so crazy, right? What are we going to do with me? How could I ever be like you? I could never be like you ..." Actually, you can complain as much as you want and feel bad about who you are, but the Buddha always sees you as a Buddha,

he can't help it. He sees that you are still alive, aren't you? You still have awareness and you have a human nervous system -- that's plenty, you're it! You have been elected! You are the next Buddha! So we share that to feel really safe. And we can share all of those things.

Let's have a quick review. We begin with '*praising*' to overcome our complacency, our skepticism and doubt. By praising and admiring what other people do we are moved to do something better, to be better. Then in '*welcoming*' we overcome our sense of greedy attachment, and also our sense of worthlessness, of feeling like I have nothing to offer. Well, we have a lot to offer. The next step, '*disclosing*,' or confession, is for overcoming our sense of shame, which is a key obstacle to spiritual practice. We all have ingrained in us a very deep sense of shame, because as children we all want an endless amount of goodness to come from the people around us. We want to connect, we want to become total bliss bubbles, all we want to do is connect and have awesome fun, blissful interconnection, "Aren't you great, aren't I great?..." We want to experience that while our parents are mostly stressed and harried -- and now I understand why parents are so stressed and harried...

Shame in terms of Western affect theory is a wonderful gift to humanity, it is about how emotions work, it is affective neuroscience. But this is affective psychology, here shame is generated when interest or excitement is blocked, so when our wish to be connected to other human beings is blocked because they are unhappy, because they are freaked out or they are not present. then we

feel very bad about ourselves. "I really wanted to connect, I really want to be part of this family, I guess there is no room for me, nobody loves me, every body hates me, I'll go eat worms."

That's shame, and shame is a very immobilizing affect, it stimulates the primitive vagal stress response to withdraw. When we are shamed it makes us feel like disappearing, like hiding our face away. Also, if we are in a certain mood, it can make us feel like killing somebody, unfortunately. But let's leave that aside for the moment.

Right now we are talking about the discharge in the sympathetic nervous system from shame, and it is exhausting; it's almost like fainting or having food poisoning. It feels like, "Someone just took all the blood out of my body and left it over there." And, literally, that is what happens when you have an intense vagal discharge: your blood pressure goes way down, you feel sort of sick, your energy is low, you don't have the will to do things.

You have to learn to overcome shame because when we are in our shame place we don't feel like Buddhas, we feel like worthless rejects, like there is nothing we can do. That is why we have to disclose. The cure for shame, like the cure for panic, or phobia, is exposure in a safe setting. Then the so-called gradual desensitization can take place.

If I am in a building and I have to go to a high floor I have to take the elevator. But I feel the elevator is going to fall. Intellectually I know it won't because it's been inspected, and I know people keep going up and down

every day and it doesn't seem to be falling. I'd like to go in there, but I get a panic attack. What do I do? If I go a little bit closer every day, and nothing happens, maybe in a few days I get on it, and off it. And maybe then I get on it, press a button and then I get off; maybe next time I go on it and push the button up one flight ... And gradually I'll get there, I'll use the elevator, without fear.

It's the same approach for shame, which is sort of a panic response to social connections. When I feel like, "No, you wouldn't love me" I know where this is going to go: you are going to leave, you are going to hate me, you are going to reject me, this won't be any good." Rejection is the root of all social anxiety, the mother of all social anxieties. The cure is to expose our sense of worthlessness, not in public, but in a safe setting. People who have gone through twelve-step programs against addiction know about this, they know how to create this safe environment, with no overhead and no special expertise. They've managed to create the most effective healing system for addictive behavior that's ever been known, as far as I know.

It's really quite awesome. The essence of how it works is in people sharing things that they are ashamed of with other people who don't turn around and shame them back, who don't judge them but instead they say, "You are welcome, we empathize with you; we feel awful too, we think you are great, come in, and keep coming back." You tell them, "I am such a worthless creep, I did this and I did that, I feel this and I feel that ..." And people will say to you,

“Come on, is that all you've got? I think you are pretty cool, and you seem pretty nice, you are walking, you are talking ...”

It's the same thing as getting on the elevator and not falling. We expose our self and our wish to connect, our wish to be accepted as we really are, not how somebody would like us to be, or how we'd like us to be, but as we really are. That is the cure for shame: exposing, confessing, in a safe and unconditionally accepting environment. The shame needs to be overcome before we can really feel ready to move on to the next level, the next of the seven steps, which is *idealization*, beginning to identify with the ideal. We can't own our ideal while we are living in core shame. When we are living in core shame anything that we touch turns sour, because "it's mine and nothing good has traction with me, anything good rolls off our back, I am no good." If somebody says something nice about us, our reaction is incredulousness: “He didn't say that nice thing about me, and if he did he did not mean it, that wasn't good.”

You can't receive positive messages when you are in a core negative affect state. You can't be open to interest and enthusiasm when all the wind is out of your sail is filled with terminal badness, when you feel like, “Why should I bother, why should I be interested, enthusiastic about anything?” When you are in a negative affective state, you can't suddenly shift gears into positive affect; you have to go into neutral first. And sharing is the cure; it's a very powerful practice.

Another aspect of shame is competitiveness: when you come in front of me as an ideal I may respond by feeling bad about myself, less than you, and therefore I am going to beat you, or hate you, because you are making me feel bad. That is another possible response, a destructive response. The other way to respond to shame, the more positive way, is to realize that the only reason I feel bad about myself is because somewhere along the line I made the calculation, I took the decision, that I can't do what you do, that I am less than you. But I am the one who thinks that I am worth less. You are not saying that, you are saying, "Come on, try it."

It's also a way to disarm the envy and competition that accompany shame. Envy and competition are like quicksand, like a trap that sucks huge amounts of energy, very unstable and destructive as a base for building self-improvement. Let's say I keep on trying to improve myself because I feel like crap myself, I keep improving myself to prove that I am better. What happens is that while I am improving myself out of jealousy and envy, driven by competition, I am constantly reinforcing the sense that I am no good -- and that is why I have to improve myself, because I am no good. Trying to become better in this way is like taking with one hand while giving with the other, It's like saving money while I am spending more.

What is the way out of that conundrum? What comes after *confessing*, *disclosing*? The next step is *rejoicing*, or gratitude. Gratitude is where we



overcome envy, competitiveness and jealousy. We learn to vicariously enjoy other people's qualities and to feel like, "Man, it's so great that you are so good at that." In the Buddhist tradition, they say that this is the best way to generate merit quickly with the least amount of effort. So, while other people do all the good work that you thought maybe you should do, you just say, "Gee, that is great!" and you get all the credit without having to do the work! "I like that, I am so happy that happened, I am so happy you did that."

Really, when you think of it, we are missing an enormous opportunity when we don't vicariously enjoy other peoples' qualities. And the only reason we don't is because we are locked in to some shame thing that makes us feel like life is a zero-sum game, as if there is only a certain amount of love to go around and you are going to get it all, like in sibling rivalry. If you win I lose. "I am not going to get my share because you are better than I am." So I decide, "I am going to be better than you, I am going to get all of it because I need all of it." The intention here is not that I want to change to be a better person than I am now, but I want to be better than you. This is the kind of result from that very sick, scarcity psychology that is part part of Western culture, that predominates in New York. We have Donald Trump, The Trump Towers, and then it'll be time for the Trump the Trump Towers ... This culture of celebrity and jockeying for celebrity is based on the belief that there is scarcity of glory out there. Glory is only for people who somehow get a certain kind of recognition from a certain kind of people in a certain place; they are the ones who get to really feel good

about themselves. Whereas the rest of us normal mortals can only aspire to, or fantasize about, that glory of feeling good about ourselves and our life. When in fact, people who do good things just to do them, because they want to and choose to, end up living longer and feeling happier, while people who become celebrities often end up badly, addicted to bad stuff. I am not saying always, not always. There are always a few Meryl Streeps around who somehow seem to come out unscathed and are enlightened beings. But celebrity is a very gruesome cult. It's one of the misplaced ways that we humans buff our narcissism.

We run into talented people who display qualities that we would like to have. And instead of feeling, "Let me watch, learn, go out and do that..." we get jealous, we feel small in comparison, we get angry, we feel envy. If we are not getting empowered by the talent that comes our way, and instead we end up feeling like, "So what is my talent, what can I do?" this is when we start to feel 'less than,' that's when the whole thing starts to feel weird. One of the ways out of this is through 'control mastery therapy.' Here it is good to know how to deal with the fear of exclusion, because beneath envy is the fear of exclusion, "I am just not good enough so I am going to be kicked out and you are going to be picked." One way to get control mastery in that situation is to exclude other people -- and that is why there is an immense amount of cliqueness in shame-based communities. But this is not the way to go, this is not the skillful thing to do.

We've talked about the twelve-step program against addiction, and I have to say that that program bears a lot of resemblance to this practice. I don't know the history of how it was developed, maybe someone will do a study about that some time, and will tell us how people could come up with such a brilliant system. I know the designers spoke to Jung and I know they spoke to a lot of the people in the Oxford Christian Revival movement, about things like simple meditation, going back to simple communities, simple experiences of community; I don't know who else they spoke to. I think they must have spoken to the Jesuits, because there are influences from the exercises of St. Ignatius and the way they talk about God, as you understand God.

For those of you who are not familiar with the twelve-step program, let me give you a quick rundown. You start out in that negative space, as when you are feeling angry, or envious. You are feeling powerless like a child, your addiction has beaten your will. You are not made of strong enough material to dig yourself out of that hole. So you seek out a higher power. That higher power is God, as you understand God. Like an Ishta Devata in the Hindu universe. You can translate an Ishta Devata as hope, light, "I can't do this, but you can do it." Or, as when Rilke said in one of his most beautiful sonnets to Orpheus, a God could do that, but I could never do that, not a human. And so you start working on changing with the help of that better being. Next you acknowledge your limitations -- or, as some would say, the limitations of your software. You seek a better way of being, you find a good model, and you turn your will and your life

over to that way of being; that is like the offering part. You go through confession. Then you take an inventory of your wounds, the things that hurt, your character defects, and you try to correct them.

Through prayer and meditation, after that, begins the awakening: you start developing a healthier conscience and developing your own spiritual practice. By the final step you are ready to go out into the world and help others to get rid of their addictions -- you become a refuge to others. It's the same kind of thing when we start out in life as a child, needing refuge.

So you go to others, you go for refuge for a fresh kind of unconditional acceptance. That is where we all need to start from. We find a new ideal, a vision for a new way of being; we clear out the old one and bring in the new. And, gradually, step by step, we wind up as a being who is really transformed. This does not belong to any one culture, this is a rite of passage, a ritual for transformation; and there are many different ways to do this. Somebody mentioned last week that psychotherapy is one way of doing this. But it's not as explicit as this practice, which you can do it yourself, in the comfort of your own home. And it's cheaper. Although it's probably good to have some of that face-to-face time with your psychotherapist, I have to say this. That is one factor of psychotherapy that has been positive for the spread of contemplative traditions in the West. Face-to-face time is really important to getting confidence, self-knowledge, encouragement. And this is very difficult for spiritual

communities to provide. They have only a few teachers and too many people who want access to them.

Psychotherapy is a great way to provide mentoring in a way that is mass-reproducible. Again, that is part of our philosophy in integrating these kinds of Western disciplines, whether it be recovery, twelve-step, or psychotherapy, into ancient contemplative traditions, at least for now, because there's nothing better around to graft them onto -- so let's graft them on to these disciplines.

The elegant and very powerful quality about this kind of practice is that if you really understand the power of it and you get the elementary pieces, you start to develop capacities that you never thought you could have. Let us go back to Tsong Khapa's quotes in the beginning. He says, *'The mandala is what binds the blissful art.'* When you are in a space with the presence of that better way of being, you feel happy, you feel a sense of hope, you feel a sense of possibility -- and if you act on it wonderful things can happen. And after he says, *'By practicing the dignity of an enlightened being enlightenment will not be far.'* So, in other words, you learn how to identify your ideal and find your native genius -- and a good model of it.

Then he says, *"The teacher Buddha Shakyamuni had the thirty-two marks and the eighty-four signs of being a fully altruistic being"* which means made of compassion. The best way to achieve success is to assume the form of success, which is the teachers' form. That is what we are doing here. Whether we admire this tradition and we admire the people who practice it, like His Holiness

The Dalai Lama, or we just want to use this technology but we have our own heroes, this is a powerful way to do your own therapy, or deepen your own therapy, do your own spiritual retreats, your own spiritual internet mentoring, virtual mentoring. If you have a mentor, he can live three valleys over, as the Tibetans say. And it's okay, as long as you feel him or her, as long as you feel their presence. This technology allows you to bring that feeling that is your own internal memory of who that person is into your awareness, and, in Dan Siegel's language, use that as a 'you-map' to reconstruct your 'we-map' and your 'I-map.'

It's a very weird thing, that our minds are able to do this. It's quite amazing I think, and we have here a very effective practice. I hope you use this, play with this. We still have a few more weeks left in this term, but they will disappear quickly before we notice. Use the time to do the practices, experiment, and ask questions.

How do we build our prosthetic self, our ideal self? When we normally think of a person, a normal person schema doesn't have an inside; we objectify people and we think of them as a body and we forget that they have minds, that they are really formless, mental beings. People are really not their bodies, they are really translucent light information; transformers, or generators. When we are trying to create the prosthetic self we are trying to create a new sense of self. From our overly dense and reified sense of self we are trying to create a self-dissolving and transparent version. That is why we do this, we do this apparently

weird practice of not only having a vivid mental image, but also reflecting that the image is really empty, transparent, translucent. This should create cognitive dissonance, because that is not our normal person schema. But that is the kind of person schema that we want to have. We want to be the kind of person that is, light, so light -- "light enough to let it go" says Leonard Cohen in his song "Smokey life."

As you move on in your practice, you notice that you don't get so hung up on who you are, you don't even necessarily feel that you are *that*, you have a way now to open your potentials, mobilize them in a certain way, a helpful way. At the heart what we all want to feel is translucent, transparent, clear, open, luminous, free ... We don't want to be bound to a content, we don't want a solid body that is just going to die, going to get sick and die. What do we need that for?

When you are practicing, and you are visualizing a person, a mentor with the moon disc and the exclamation point inside, in effect you intentionally imagine the person as a mental construction, a conceptual person. That is the purpose of language; because at the heart is the understanding that we human beings are made of light and information -- in other words, awareness and words. Allen Grossman, an American poet and my favorite poetry critic, said that "*The purpose of poetry is to preserve the image of the human.*" And when we have an exceptional human being who we love or admire, who becomes our hero, we want to encode that person's image in the language matter of a

poem -- and that's really what we are doing here, but in reverse. In this case we start by taking the language matter of the practice, and out of it we learn to create the image of a person that feels like a *real* person to us.

And the reason why that is -- we are getting technical here -- and why that actually works is that a person isn't a body, a person isn't a machine, a person is a virtual reality mostly generated by awareness and words -- concepts, thoughts, cultural constructs. That is how a person is defined in this tradition, we are essentially who we think we are, who we say we are. If we say we are Buddhas we'll be Buddhas. That is partly why we use visualization in this way, to remind ourselves that we are actually creating and cultivating this being with our own minds, our linguistic minds. The only thing that isn't artificial in that sense, in the sense that it is not intentionally manufactured by our mind is the moon disc. The moon disc is a natural source of illumination that stands in for this intelligence that is the natural essence of our mind. We say that we human beings are made of a combination of nature and culture. And the images we build of our self look like a person and they act like a person, but what they really are made of is awareness and language. We will come back to this.

One last comment about language and imagery. If you are a vivid imager, a good visualizer, and you can go through the steps of the process and see everything happening with your mind's eye, without words, it's better. You don't need the words, they are there to help you, just like scaffolding. But this is not easy; most people can't do much visualization from the start.



The dissolving self is a key notion in these practices. This is a complicated issue. Many people fear that if they practice selflessness they will lose their personhood, their individuality. If you think of a person as a fixed entity, which is the normal way we humans think of a person, then of course you could see the reason for that conclusion, and feel that something is being lost in the process. But think instead of a person as awareness and language; or the way Freud thought of a person, as the capacity to love and connect with others, to take in the presence of others and respond to them in a dynamic flow. This is a view of a person as a creative process, something or someone constantly evolving. In this case, the most effective person is the most open person, meaning the most open mind, because it is that kind of mind that is the most able to relate to *all* people and things in the most open way. This is a very different way of looking at people. It is one that is very fundamentally relational, in the sense that we are really seen as, identified with, the capacity to relate. The more we relate to the 'other' the larger our sense of self becomes. That is why humility, or radical openness, in a sense, actually strengthens our sense of self, and makes us more proactive, more dynamic. That is the theory. And that is the paradox of selflessness.

We will get deeper into these and other psychological issues related to self loss later. These are subtle issues, but not to be minimized. In these practices we do feel like you are dissolving, we are supposed to feel like we are dissolving. And we humans have some kind of overactive self-protective reactions to that

feeling of loss. The art of this process of change and transformation is to learn how to be larger than those self-protective responses, to go beyond them, to learn how to let go. We are not going to lose anything vital. In a way, this is sort of a death practice. But we can go back to that, that's another conversation.

## Chapter Five

### *Requesting and Receiving: The Integral Stage of Internalization*

We have been talking about this practice for transformation to another, better, self. This is a gradual practice for gradual transformation, we can prepare for every step on the way. It's fine to take your time, you don't need to be a buddha just yet. There are plenty of buddhas to go around! They'll be there for you as long as you need them. When you become stronger and you are ready for that next step, then you may choose to become a buddha, and not just remain as a child of the buddhas.

There are two types of creative imagination in the mentor bonding visualization processes we've talked about that we should discuss as we move forward. The first is creating an encounter with our mentor as an archetype, and the other is creating -- or, more accurately, re-creating -- our self into a being that is more in line with our 'true self,' our inner genius, or whatever you want to call it, and not with the traumatic, hurt or shameful events that we identify with, that we mistake ourselves for being.

As we get closer and closer to transforming inside, there are a couple of things that will come up that will challenge us. One is that, psychologically speaking, we are messing around with our ego, which is our security system. Because, even if it sucks being me, at least it's a territory I know, my 'claim to fame' so-to-speak. When we are in meditation and we start to feel our self

dissolve, we have self-protective mechanisms, like fear or discomfort, that come up to bring our self back — and that shows the meditation is working! Our brain is dispatching self-protection signals in the form of chemicals, and that's what we want. We have to learn and get ready to let go of those self-protective mechanisms, we don't want to mix a potentially healing, opening, transformative experience like this one with self-protection; that would be like trying to relax and to get angry at the same time, it just doesn't work, there is no room in our system for these two states at the same time.

We need to go through a separation process in order to disarm our self-protective mechanisms. We have to let go of our neurotic, defensive ego, and for that we have to feel fundamentally safe. This is hard. But we have to let go of those defenses in order to feel that goodness, that openness and kindness within us. We can't feel that if we are all tied up in knots. Remember, the key is to feel safe. And our relationship with our mentor is helping us to feel that sense of safety. Ultimately, as we reach the point where we admit that deity inside of us, we recognize that deity, that Buddha, inside of us, we are at the cusp of realizing that we are at the end of this relationship, this little romance with our mentor. "Pretty soon I'm going to grow up and leave home, and I'm going to be my own mentor." That's a separation we have to prepare for. It's like terminating therapy: people often stall and even get overly neurotic for a while before they can admit they don't need that support anymore. Children do the

same thing, they act out as they grow when part of them is ready to grow up and part of them is not.

So, we're now at the point of willing to re-create our self as a deity, an enlightened being, with that kind of dignity. The ability to do it requires a capacity to face leaving the nest and being parented. This is a profound power shift, bucking the fundamental regressive nature of the ego, that childlike trust we're all hooked on that shows up and says to us, "wouldn't it be nice to have a good parent again?" At a certain point we realize that having a parent isn't so necessary, that we can do it ourselves. But to be ready for that shift we have to be willing to let go of the notion that this other person, this deity or whatever, is not omnipotent. Buddha is not God. The deity on which you are meditating is a mental construction, and the people on whom these archetypes are constructed are human beings, just like us. Even the Buddha was a human being, just like us. The Buddhist view is very clear on this point: we all have this buddha nature, this buddha genius within us. But in order to reach that, to activate it, we have to let go of the illusion of childhood, that someone will take care of us -- and that is hard to do.

When the Buddha sat at the foot of the bodhi tree after reaching enlightenment he said "I've learned all this stuff, and I now I need to formulate a way of teaching it." I recommend that you watch the movie with Keanu Reeves called *Little Buddha*, even if it is quite Hollywood-ish. It's kind of off-color, but I like that. Even better, you can read the set of comic books by the Japanese

artist Osamu Tezuka on the life of the Buddha. Anyway, the movie shows vividly how the Buddha overcomes desire, and fear, and finally, the most subtle of the demons, Mara, the demon that sees us as the *devaputra*, the child of God, that demon in our mind that doesn't want to be an adult. We don't want to grow up! In America we have this in spades, and in New York especially. We don't want to grow up, we don't want to face grownup stuff, especially mortality. In India, in general, the deities are eleven years old, while Buddhist deities are 15 or 16, except for the fierce deities, they certainly aren't kids ...

The idea here is what psychiatrists call infantile narcissism: we're born from the womb and immediately are confronted with our parents, and we recognize them, "Hey, it's the people who vowed to put me at the center of their world! Aren't they sweet? I don't want to let go of them!" And even when our parents screw up, we still long for them, for that child experience. It wasn't just that it was nice to have them around, it was totally necessary to have them around – we depended on them for our very survival! And, somewhere, in our instinctive birth trauma memory, we still believe that, in life, it is necessary to be the child of a mother or father. That is the fundamental factor that keeps us in childhood mode, regressed, that keeps us from changing. We're still holding on to being the person we were when we were little. And that's what therapy is good for, to let go of that little self. My psychiatric practice would be out of business if this weren't true! We human beings have this very conservative streak in us, we don't want to change, because it's so scary. We want to be taken care of

instead. But qualified caretakers are hard to find. And as you become more of an adult, it's hard to find someone who can satisfy your wants. I see this all the time in couples therapy – people are angry because their partners aren't better parents to them than their own parents. But that wasn't in the contract with the partner -- it wasn't even really in the contract with the parents! If you look at the typical marriage vows, there's nothing in there about 'be my parent, be my mother, be my father.' But we want that psychically. And as long as we are hooked on that addictive fantasy, wanting that kind of unconditional love, we can't find the love within us, which is the biggest source, the real gold mine of love in our lives. Why can't we find it? It's because we are not feeling safe. And why don't we feel safe? It's because we are convinced, delusional, that we are not grown up yet, that we still need parents to protect us.

Transforming your self into a deity is pretty far out and radical, and many cultures don't allow this sort of thing. In Sufi literature, for example, people get killed for saying things like 'we're all God.' For those who want people to push around this is an obstacle. And it is upsetting for those who want God to take care of them. It's not just a plot of the priestly class to keep everyone in chains, as the Reformation would have you believe. The reality is that we want and need that kind of containment. And Buddhism takes an interesting view of this, as illustrated in these practices. In this case the point is that we should get parenting as long as we need it; but once we stop needing it we should get over it, grow out of it. We should start seeing that we are God, or whatever it is,

whatever you want to call it. This is in the shift in the relationship between the mentor and the student, and in the relationship between parent and child as well. "Yes, you did give birth to me, and now I'm an adult. I don't really need you anymore, but I still love you, even if you annoy me..." There is a beautiful short passage in *The Blue Cliff Record* that describes this stage that I like, and that I'll quote again:

*"Teacher, I'm breaking out!"*

*"Break in!"* the teacher responds.

We can say, in non-Buddhist language, that we are ready to break into our true selves. The true self is ready to be born, to use Jungian language, or theistic language. And the mentor's maturity will draw that out of us, galvanize that move.

What is the quality of the mentor-disciple relationship at this point? What are the rights and responsibilities now? When you learn to give your own self the vote of confidence while still under the watchful eye of the mentor, including in the context of a community, with regulations and markers, then you can take your self seriously as a potential buddha.

I should mention that Bob Thurman recently translated a commentary of Tsong Khapa's "The Extremely Brilliant Lamp" which has a manual on how to be a mentor, what to do and what not to do. One of the elements is that it tells you what style of teaching and which expressions to use based on the type of student you encounter. You might think that with the less advanced student



you would want to go more slowly, and with an advanced student you would want to answer directly. But, interestingly enough, this set of instructions says the opposite. With the more advanced students, the mentor should be elliptical or obscure and let them figure it out for themselves. If have that capacity, they should earn the understanding. Those who are not so quick or far along you teach more directly so that they don't get confused or discouraged.

Although I have not considered this too deeply, this seems consistent with the changes in communication in the relationship between therapist and patient. One of the changes is that you begin to take the therapist inside yourself. This is the *internalization* process, the third in the four steps in Western psychotherapy, as well as the fifth step in the *Sevenfold Offering*: "I imagined this conversation that we had, and you said some things I didn't like, but I guess you were right..." At that stage the patient is beginning to come to the realization that she or he is going to be their own therapist, they have the therapist inside now. And the learning process will culminate in having a very strong inner therapist.

Another key notion is the kind of self that we want to generate in this process -- and the kind that we don't want to generate. One of the obstacles that must be overcome in the process of creating the deity that will inspire and guide is to our better self is our rigid concept of who we are. We then know that we can be something better, something different. And we tell our self a bit of a fairy tale, we convince our own self that we are a buddha already. And so

we cultivate the so-called pride of buddhahood, the dignity of an enlightened being. In the texts the same word is used for "pride" as a positive or a negative thing to have. That is because the point is not what we think – “hey, I'm a buddha.” We come to understand instead that we have a self that is about selflessness, radical openness and connectivity. We don't lock our self in any one form, that is not the thing to do, it's not healthy or helpful. We want to be in a form that is totally transformable, so that we can be whatever is needed, provide the help that is needed. In order to develop that kind of positive pride, we have to overcome the pride of ordinariness, the concept of ourselves as we have it now. This is typical tantric homeopathy, or alchemy: You fight pride with pride, fire with fire, as it were, you fight one concept with another ...

Our attachment to our ordinary neurotic self is rooted in our attachment to our parents, who are connected to this artifact that I take to be me. All our self-protective instincts are tied up in this little flotsam and jetsam of consciousness and energy, our life raft in the sea of impermanence. I like to say that in this process of building a better self we are giving ourselves a 'prosthetic self.' Bob Thurman likes to call it a spacesuit, a suit that we as 'psychonauts' need for going deep into the layers of consciousness, beyond landmarks of good and bad, and other dualistic notions. You need the spacesuit so that you don't panic as your oxygen levels diminish. You're giving yourself a prop, a better self, so that you can let go of your worse self. You sort of fool yourself that you're going to get another solid self like this ideal one you have chosen to live in. But

this ideal self is a self-dissolving self -- and that is key, that is what makes this process truly healing.

This new buddha self is not deluded about being an autonomous, independent thing; it knows full well that it is dependent on causes and conditions, and imputation. It uses its free-flowing openness to support its capacity to connect and to act. And it actually works, even though we may not believe it, just like we don't believe that we really can grow up or be parents or caregivers -- and then we do it! If you ever reflect on your life and the things you've accomplished, if you've thought about how much you've done that you could not have conceived at age six or eight, you'd see just how far-out this life is, and how far it can go. But we never take that victory lap, acknowledge the credit we're due. That's because we're never free of the fundamental angst we have inside that says "But I'm not good enough, I always need Mom and Dad, I can't face the world on my own."

Moving from child to adult, or from dependent disciple to self healer, is a very powerful psychic transformation, and so is the process that leads to it. This practice is messing with your mind, but in a good way. This is not that different from other types of meditation, but it is more psycholinguistic, so it delves deeper, into the unconscious, where the childhood traumas live. And, gradually, you will get to a state of feeling "You're safe now. You're a buddha. You can handle it, you can leave behind those old protective instincts."

This is rather similar to Carl Jung's views, and I wish that he were around to tell where he got his ideas. In my own view, or version, of history, I believe that modern psychoanalysis is a tantric practice. Marc Epstein might agree with me. Why? It is a psychology that is based on the intimate bond between therapist and client, and it understands the basic instincts to be those very traits which can be transformed. Freud didn't believe this at all. Jung, being a son of a minister, bought into religion. He studied the Latin and Greek sources, as well as Chinese and Tibetan texts, and he really connected with some of the more foreign ideas. Jung talked about active imagery, about how we need a heroic archetype to transform our limiting persona. Our true self is like the buddha self, that is our awakened self, the self that emerges out of an encounter between the single consciousness and the collective unconscious, which is another way of saying God and culture. Jung strongly believed in sublimation, meaning that by transforming our perception through tapping into our positive loving energy we can heal ourselves, we can transform our negative selves into positive ones. Freud, on the other hand, believed that we humans had a negative side that we could not change. Freud was Jung's only mentor; and Freud had no mentor. Neither had a good mentor ...

Jung went the extra distance and thought about how to bring these diverse traditions into psychotherapy. Freud didn't think that was possible, and in his day he was probably right. He could have never sold psychotherapy to the scientific community. My own belief is that the tantras and psychotherapy

access parts of the mind in similar ways. Many people who come to see me have a Buddhist practice but aren't sure how these things fit together. And half the battle is understanding what you're doing while you're doing it, which is parenting ourselves. And we use our creativity to get us there – "we fake it til we make it" so to speak, and this is the first stage, the *Creation Stage* in tantra. Moving on to the next stage, the *Perfection Stage*, we become chemically integrated beings. But before we get there we are telling our self a beautiful story about being a better self, how we are a better self; we are running simulations of that better self. And, like the Velveteen Rabbit, if we rub it long enough, it becomes real. Our inner child, which is vested with so much energy, conditioning and psychic power, doesn't dissolve just like that! All of that conditioning is plastic, and when we reinforce that plastic over and over, moment by moment, and then reverse that, we shift our 'locus of control,' to use the psychotherapeutic term, from childhood to a more mature position. And in that process we have a parent available, but the child still can act as a sub-personality, so there is something of a dissonance. In meditation on the cushion you are a buddha, but when you walk outside and someone steps on your toes, you become freaked out, your selflessness vanishes. So you toggle between these two aspects and not give in fully to either, you can't reify either one. You must have the capacity to integrate both in a way that is bigger than either one. You don't want to be stuck in either mode.

When I was young I used to borrow books from my father, who was a therapist. Jung was my favorite. If there had been authentic, elaborate sources for what he wrote, that would have been very useful. Unlike Jung's texts, the Unexcelled Yoga Tantras come with very elaborate, scientific, detailed descriptions of the process of transformation into a complete adult. I don't think it is very different from what happens in ordinary healthy, natural human development with all the adjustments that come with it, with parenting or community living. Maybe we have a bad chemistry day, we have a seizure that results in a near-death experience, an extreme experience. But here we are intentionally cultivating these transformative experiences gradually, with others and within our self, and these promote a new sense of self that is capable of unconditional love and care, a self who can connect to a whole larger network – community, planet, whatever – and that is a natural development .

As we advance in this practice, the system it brings with it removes the accidental features, allowing for the full natural development of a human being in very few years. There is something special about the people who embody this methodology – like the Dalai Lama or Gelek Rinpoche – and it is all about this incredible technology that is replicable. It's fascinating to us, and important for us.

How important is it that we stay true to the complexity of the symbolism of this material? The really advanced teachers say that it is very important to keep the details of these practices in place, for we need to be able to map out

all the buddha material now, while we have this creative imagination. Gelek Rinpoche likes to say that if you want to have a great buddha house when you are a buddha, you'd better imagine it now. We need that specificity, this is not some vague fuzzy thing. We need to be very specific in the details, iconographically and conceptually, for we are aiming for a very specific goal. Of course, monastics who are full-time meditators or visualizers can spend a lot of time attending to the detail, but for those of us that live in the world there needs to be a streamlined practice.

That's what we aim for here at the Nalanda Institute, to have an accessible, less complicated approach that teaches the principles from which to improvise. Once you understand the story, and what you need to tell your mind, your inner child, to transform you, then the details – colors and so on – are not so important. In fact, there are many variations on these practices; the forms are the deity of your choice. All of them say that *this* is the vehicle to enlightenment, *this* is the king of tantras. They can't all be -- or maybe they are, for different people with different imaginations. It is the perceptual and narrative shifts that we need to make which are critical, and until we can embody these shifts effortlessly, the specific deity form is there to help us, to support our development. For me, before I understand why something is in a practice, I do it; and when the understanding comes, I may modify it or discard it – I'm busy enough with two children. But until then, until my understanding comes, I follow the tradition, which is tried and true.

## Chapter Six

### Constancy and Dedication: The Optimal Stage of Integration

There are a lot of exciting things ahead for this chapter. We are finally finishing the *Sevenfold Offering*, that is, the seven-step process of role modeling. And that in and of itself is a satisfying and significant accomplishment. We will talk about the two last steps: *requesting presence* and *dedication*. It is in *requesting presence* that mantras -- affirmations, recitations, or any other of affirmative speech -- come in.

I recommend a real traditional blessing on this practice for those of you who feel incomplete without that. It is a great opportunity if you want to get a flavor for the traditional way rather than get just the psychology. If you want to feel the connection to the lineage this is your chance. We have invited Gelek Rinpoche, one of the masters in the Tibetan tradition, to offer this for those who want it. He was trained in Tibet and he's actually the lineage master of a number of different practices, role modeling practices. In April he will come back to do White Tara, the other archetype that we'll work with this year. In any case, these different practices are essentially the same. The engine under the hood is the same, but the equipment is different.

Gelek Rinpoche is a real sweetheart. And he's amazing when he leads these kinds of ritualistic practices. Most of the time you would think he is sort of a laughing Buddha, he's got a sweet tooth and he is very, very funny, actually he's



hysterical. Then, when he gets into one of these initiations, he makes you feel like you are totally transported, and you wonder, where did this guy come from? It's quite interesting, to feel the power of these ritual forms, and to get a feel for a lifelong connection with a tradition, a lineage, a practice, like this one.

Gelek Rinpoche will be giving a form for practicing the Medicine Buddha. The form that I have given you is a simplified version of the most common form. The more complete form involves seven Medicine Buddhas. Seven is quite a lot. This high number, in a sense, is there to give some extra power. Gelek Rinpoche will be giving the seven forms. I do the one form.

One of the interesting things that I like very much about the Medicine Buddha practice is that when we take in the Medicine Buddha, when he comes into us, he melts into us, and he shrinks. This is not very common. Instead of getting our head shrunk, the Medicine Buddha himself shrinks, he shrinks himself, very selflessly, into hand size. And he sits on our crown, sort of in the place of the *ushnisha*, the Buddha's extra scoop. The Buddha's image comes towards us, and then turns around to face the same direction we are facing, face forward, no longer confronting us. This is all really interesting. And it is full of symbolism. We may wonder, why does the Buddha sit over our head, what is going on? ...

Another thing we'll talk about today is the "stack," or stacking your Buddha on your head. What is that all about? In Rinpoche's teaching of the Medicine Buddha the seven Buddhas are all stacked on top of your head while you are walking around. It's an interesting part of this teaching, this beautiful

teaching. The form he is going to give goes back to the sixteenth century. I will provide you with a translation. It's all very lovely, it's very sweet.

Next we will have an introduction to White Tara. And then we will do the White Tara practice, together with Mary Reilly Nicholls, our yogini. Mary will also teach us a little bit about mantra recitation and guru yoga in the Kashmir Shaivite tradition. And so with Mary we will be getting a taste of another traditional approach. For those of you who know Mary, you know that she will keep us all awake and lively. She will keep our energy positive as she gives us another flavor of Indian yogic tantric meditation. I hope you are all getting a little flavor ...

I mentioned earlier that we will complete the *Sevenfold Offering* in this discussion. We will talk in some detail about the last two steps, *requesting constancy* and *dedication*. They usually involve taking forward the process of internalizing and integrating the ideal that you projected outward on the mentor. At this stage, usually, a couple of important parts of the engine come together.

One is mantra recitation. The other is the dissolution of the mentor into your self; and, along with the mentor, you dissolve. It's at that time that we do practices that are more familiar to us from the traditions of mindfulness, like *Dzogchen* practices of clear mind or natural mind, what we might call deep mindfulness practice, analytic insight, and so on.

After you absorb the mentor you get an extra oomph, an extra boost, from taking on his spirit, his essence, his blessing, his approval. And you nudge your self into trying to do some stabilizing meditation, and you meditate on things for an expanded period of time. As you dissolve, and the mentor dissolves into your self, you can get a sense of the mentor in you and you inside the mentor; we will talk about that, that is a very interesting and important step.

*Dedication*, the seventh step, is bouncing back and diving into the world. This comes after *identifying* and *internalizing* the mentor, that means after you have identified and internalized a whole mission and a whole new way of being in the world.

I want to point out that this mentor-disciple relationship is not about fostering dependency; it's about allowing dependency, healthy dependency, the way we do in child rearing, allowing it as a way to satisfy our human need for connection, encouragement, guidance and correction. And with that we will be prepared and at some point be ready to take the mentor's blessing and go off on our own, become more autonomous. As we do that, there comes a change in the power dynamic, in the sense of idealization which in this case is about who's big and who's small, that moves from the mentor to my self.

I don't know if anyone here knows Gaston Bachelard, this Frenchman, this really wild, whacky Frenchman who used to be a chemist and then he became a psychoanalyst and started writing these amazing poetic books about the elements, and the psychology of the different elements. One of my favorite

books of his is "The Poetics of Space." There he talks about how you remember that sense of smallness, and how small is beautiful. Why is small beautiful? Because when we were children we were small. And there is something beautiful about our natural biology, what happens when we encounter a small helpless living being. It's just like with puppies or kittens, their sight instantly makes our heart go out to them. It's disarming. And it is a natural part of our neurobiological process, part of the life cycle. As adults we are wired to feel safe and secure and connected to the small, but when we are children we just feel small.

Isn't it interesting, this turnaround in who is big and who is small: the mentor becomes small and the student becomes big, re-enacting the normal parent-child life cycle, where at some point the parent becomes childlike, in need of parenting, and the child becomes the parent. The psychology here is very clear: We're trying to strengthen our self, our ego really, in a way, we are trying to strengthen our healthy sense of self awareness and interdependence, with the mentor as the model, and within a normal biological unit, a "dyad" as psychologists and psychoanalysts trained in the West like to say, the parent-child dyad. So that is cool.

There is also an agenda. The Medicine Buddha as Mentor is not just coming to our crown; we are going to sort of, in a way -- this may sound impious -- suck the life out of the Mentor. First, there is supposed to be a transgressive element here. You are trying to get something from this other person, you are

trying to get what you need from someone else. It is like a cannibalistic ritual, and like the Christian mass. It's the idea of "transubstantiation" -- a word my son just learned, which refers to what supposedly happens in mass when you get a piece of flat bread on your tongue and then it turns out to be Christ's body. So you are eating Christ's body -- and suddenly it's as if you've become a cannibal. Like rehearsing a certain kind of very primal ritual. Like, for example, when we are in nature and we admire the power of an animal, and then we hunt the animal, and then we eat it ... Somewhere in all that there is a sense of reverence, the sense with which hunters of indigenous peoples speak of the animal as a worthy adversary, and of taking the animal with respect. The animal could have killed us, but we killed it first. It is also about giving life: the animal is giving you its life, strength and power -- and that is recognition of the interdependence that we are all part of.

In the context of the parent-child relationship, as anyone who is a parent knows, you do get the life sucked out of you. It's kind of okay, it's a sweet thing, you're contributing to life, and there is much to say about the gift of contributing. But being a parent takes a tremendous amount of energy and focus. The same is true of the mentoring process.

Another thing that I find very interesting about the Medicine Buddha practice is that the Buddha goes into your brain. That's cool, isn't it? Why was the brain so important when this practice was designed? Obviously, some people had noticed that people with damaged heads were damaged, that

there is something about the head, or the brain in our head, whatever is up there, that makes us who we are.

We will talk more about the brain and the whole nervous system on Friday and Saturday, when we talk about yoga and the chakras, and how the chakras are lined up along the neural axis, what neuropsychologists call the neural tube, around which we develop. The brain is all up there in the head, while the chakras seem to be mostly further below. And the neurons are the cells up there in the brain. However, they have very, very long arms, called axons, that travel down through the spinal column, and all the way down to the toes. The axons transmit information from the brain through the spinal column and to the rest of the body.

I was talking with my friend Bill Bushell about these two models of the nervous system, the yogic model and the western model. Looking at these two models is like looking at the nervous system from two ends of a neuron. The Western model looks at the nervous system from the cell body end, all amassed up here, in the brain. This Eastern model looks at the nervous system from the axon end, the axon with its synapses which connect with our organs and through them it creates an effect, it changes things. In the yogic system there is emphasis on where you feel things are happening in your nervous system, where the action is, rather than where the nerve cells anatomically sit. And up there, in the crown, sits the *sahasrara chakra*, the lotus of one hundred thousand petals. The other lotuses along the spine have three, four, sixteen, or sixty-four petals.

One hundred thousand petals is a lot, compared to the numbers of petals on the lotuses in the lower chakras. This high number stands, at least partly, as a recognition that somehow, whatever is up there in the head is where a lot of stuff is happening. In the Buddha model this is represented by his ushnisha, what I call the extra scoop of brain sitting up on top of the head, which in my view stands for, not so much the prefrontal cortex, which is like the third eye in the yogic model, but, rather, it stands for our capacity to *regulate* the prefrontal cortex. Specifically, it allows us to integrate and regulate the rest of the brain into a highly social, highly malleable and educable nervous system. We will go over all of this in further detail later, don't worry if you don't understand it fully at this time, there is no brain quiz here.

Going back to the Medicine Buddha practice, and Tibetan tantra more generally, there is a recognition, an understanding of the intergenerational flow of information, of how information moves from one generation to the other. There is a strong ancestral element appearing in different ways. For example, similar to totem poles with carved clan lineages, in some cases the tantric images have many heads, stacked up, one on top of the other. The practitioner may be guided to imagine all the ancestors of the practice, from the first practitioner going all the way back to when the practice was first invented, to the first person who had the experience and then said to others, "Well, this was my experience, give it a try, meditate this way." So you imagine the first practitioner, and their student, and the student of their student, and their

student, and so on ... There may be sixteen or thirty-seven practitioners in the lineage, however many, you use your imagination to stack them on your head, as a way of appropriating the practice. You say, "I remember Yabum, Senge, Lorab, Loksala, Dorje, Drakpa ..." and so you remember each one of them, and each one then melts into you, they all melt into you.

That reminds me of the movie, "Amistad," about slaves on a boat from Africa that ends up in Massachusetts. The leader of the slaves goes to John Quincy Adams, then a lawyer in Massachusetts, and says to him, "I am the sole reason all of my ancestors existed!" [38:50] We can say that this attitude is very American, in the sense that our children think that they are the sole reason why we exist, why everything exists. And we like it that way, it's progressive. Even in Christianity it's all about the child, it's all about Christ. Why is it all about the child? Because the information flows downwards -- all the experience, all the effort, all the contribution, it all flows down to the next generation, to our children. And it all flows through the brain into the heart. So, you see, this practice of visualizing all your ancestors in this way shows a very subtle understanding of how life works, how transformation works.

In one of the first initiations, the initiation is conferred by goddesses and gods floating over your head with vases pouring water on your head, I guess to remind you that you have a body and mind, but *not* the kind you think you have. It isn't your ordinary body and mind, but a body and mind that are vessels



of enlightenment, they are Buddha vessels; they are natural Buddhas. And that is the purpose of this practice.

I think one of the most important elements in this kind of practice is the dyadic bond, the bond between mentor and student; mother and child; child and parent; teacher and student, whatever it is, a dualistic relationship, a dyad. Normally, children and students, disciples, apprentices and so forth don't necessarily have empathy for what the teachers' or the parents' experience is. And the dyad is really what collapses the hierarchy, what brings the hierarchy, or the sense or boundary or distance in the parent-child bond, down, when you take the parent inside of you and you see inside of them, and you find out, "Oh, dear, they are just like me, they have a mind, they have insecurities, they have hopes, they were children once, and maybe I'll be a parent at some point ..."

That's kind of what happens when the mentor melts into you after the affirmation process, you feel that your insides are merging with the mentors' insides, and you lose your sense of boundaries, you get a sense that there really is a kind of empathic bond or mutual openness that transcends the separateness of your bodies ... And that is when we start to get to what is called the "real deity." In the practice we always remember that the image is considered to be a mental construct, a learning aid, not the real thing but an approximation, if you will. The real deity, or the real Buddha, is the mind state, inside a person, it could be inside one of us -- and that is called "Divine Pride."

So you have these two elements you start with, that are coming into play.

And what's happening is that the appearance of two separate beings dissolves, and even your appearance of yourself as a separate being dissolves; and when that happens you get into an ocean of awareness in which you see that you really are part of something else, something else that transcends you. And so you have an experience of self-transcendence even in terms of your own limitations. It's a very powerful practice.

There's an element here worth noting, that the mentor plays the superego, or the parent image that is like the superego, sitting up there, sort of like "God is watching over you" or "mommy and daddy are watching over you." And then the mentor, the superego, or the parent, dissolve into you. Then, who's watching? ... From the perspective of psychoanalysis, and the four steps in the relationship between therapist and patient, this is evidence of an understanding of the process of transformation beginning with parent as other, and then gradually internalizing the parent as superego, internalizing the superego, and finally really becoming what psychoanalysts call the "superego ideal," your inner parent, your higher self.

Another aspect of this practice that I want to talk a little more about is mantra. We have talked quite a bit about visualization but not much about mantra. I am fascinated by the visualization practice, and I think that generally the Buddhist tradition puts a unique, really strong emphasis on that kind of practice. But as you will see when Mary comes, in her tradition, in the Hindu yoga tradition, even though the same technology is used, there is much less

emphasis on visualization. I would love to have a conference on why that is the case, I think it's fascinating.

Why did the Buddha make so much of visualization? I think it has to do with an emphasis on the physical transformation of the body and of the environment. It's kind of progressive and materialistic in a way, but in another way it is non-materialistic because here the body is made of mind. In any case, sound, like in mantra practice, feels less tangible, less materialistic, less present than sight. Nonetheless sound is as important as sight. It is useful, because it's not just the image of the healing mentor that calms us and reassures us, it's also the voice. The voice is reassuring in tone; because of its physical properties, when sound is being produced by a calm body we can catch that calm feeling through the air. And there is also the information content of the voice. It's through speech that a lot of social modeling goes on.

We humans are the only animals that can model habits, and that can download information that is not about things that are actually happening at the moment. This is an incredible innovation in evolution for social learning. Think about it. All other animals can only learn by watching, watching what the parent does, or the other adult does, or other animals do, and then doing it. They do not think, they do not contemplate about when God created heaven and earth, or who their ancestors were, or when the world will come to an end. They don't have the capacity of speech and imagination that goes along with it, the capacity to reassemble visual input using syntax, using the analytic power

of the syntax model to reconstruct material reality using words. Only we humans can do that. In that context, the Tantras are often spoken of not just as the *Tantrayana*, which can be sort of translated as the vehicle of the loom that weaves enlightenment across the generations, but also as the *Mantrayana*, the poetic vehicle, the semiotic vehicle, what one poetry critic describes as "the language matter of enlightenment."

What is the information download? It is input that constructs our sense of self. It is not genetic information. It's information that is all encoded in thought patterns and word patterns and such. That is what the poet Allen Grossman refers to when he talks about the way in which poetry preserves, or conserves humanity, the human image, the image of the beloved, or the hero, the Divine, God. What is preserved is not just the visual image, but also the language, the language matter of poetry, by putting words together in a certain way and with a certain rhythm, because the sounds of the words, their rhythm and their resonance are as important as their meaning. We can feel how the sounds affect our physical body in a certain, specific way. And that is what mantra is used for.

One of my favorites among chanting sounds is from a wonderful community of nuns, the Buddhist nuns of Chuchikjall, a nunnery in Ladakh. They have recorded a CD called "Vajra Sky," you can look it up on iTunes. It's beautiful. There is this sweetness and purity in their voice, they make you feel like you are there, it's really lovely. Although not everyone goes for this kind of sound.

Yoga masters like our Mary Reilly Nichols can help us work with sound, with mantra. They do OM recitation in the Hindu yoga way, which is chanting. There are also Tibetan chants associated with White Tara and the Medicine Buddha. As we go over these sound practices you will get to experience the power of your verbal mind to create a sense of personal presence. Like when you hear a certain song and you feel transported, and you feel one or another person, you might not see them but you feel them. This is because voice and speech are very powerful ways of conveying the presence of another person, because speech can deliver more specific information, and meaning, than imagery. Imagery has its own power, it can carry symbolism, and emotion, through color, for example. But speech actually has a more direct relationship to meaning because it can be much more precise as a form of information, as an encoding strategy for information; so it is considered extremely important.

In a sense, as we move on, speech will become more and more important in our practice. Speech is one of the three elements -- body, speech and mind -- that keep coming back in many ways, for purification on the road to enlightenment, to Buddhahood.

It is very interesting to see what happens when you practice with speech. You will get to experience the power of it. In Western terms we may talk of this practice in terms of a neurolinguistic model, or a psycholinguistic model. This is a

model that talks about the power of language and symbols, a model that uses the power of linguistic symbols, whether verbal or visual, to create reality.

The idea here is that we have the body, which is this amazing life generator, this amazingly mutable, changeable, life generator. This is especially true for humans. Because, depending on what software we put into it, we can produce either hell or heaven; we can produce utopia or dystopia; we can produce nirvana or samsara. In Buddhist texts this is the message, it is said explicitly, exactly that way, beginning with the Buddha's first teaching, the *four noble truths*.

So what's the software? What is the content that is going to guide us? We need a gyroscope to guide us towards a truly sustainable way of living. And that is what is communicated across the generations. Tantra can be translated as loom, or weave; "*tantu*" means to stretch, so tantra is a way of saying how, over time, we weave a way of being that is sustainable, civilizing, enlightened -- and so tantra is transformative.

How do we weave that kind of life? We weave it through language, with linguistic imagery and symbols that are brought across generations and get woven into the fabric of our nervous system, into our way of being. It's almost like we are learning how the world was constructed, and how we can reconstruct it, all over again, and then we do just that, we reconstruct it, according to our own specs.

As I've mentioned to you, traditionally, tantra is a purification practice, and it begins a purging process. If you take up an unexcelled yoga tantra practice, a higher yoga tantra practice, you will see that it starts with a mantra that says something like,

*"Suddenly everything melts into voidness, into emptiness."*

And then, out of the voidness, comes a mantra saying something like,

*"I'm naturally pure, I am the natural purity of all things." Or*

*"I am the self whose nature is the diamond of intuitive, blissful openness."*

And out of the void, or into the womb of the void, comes a syllable, a seed syllable, that is planted. In high yoga tantra practice everything comes out of a seed syllable, like a whoosh! For example, out of the seed syllable comes a moon; then comes another seed syllable and out of that comes something else. The seed syllable is a symbol of the mind, and you purge the mind as you put an image or concept in it that is powerful and positive. Your mind creates it, just like that, like a culture medium, or like stem cells, the original stem cells.

This reminds me of "Walkabout," a powerful Australian movie from the 1960s. The walkabout is what the aboriginal boys (I am not sure about the girls) do when they come of age. They go out with the men who gather and wander

around to hunt. The walkabout is a symbol, a journey of transition, it's the right of passage from adolescence into adulthood. In the walkabout you can tap into the "Dreamtime" beyond time and space, beyond past, present and future. One of the things that struck me was in the very opening scenes. First there is the sun, rising out of the desert. It all looks just like one of these meditation scenes that make you feel the space is miles wide, as wide as the planet, and everything shimmers with the rising sun. It makes you feel like the world is being created again, like something magical is happening. And then, there is a cut to the next scene, to a school, a grammar school in a town in Australia. You can hear the kids in the school chanting the alphabet, "a-a b-b c-c d-d ...". And you get this feeling, as if it was a witching chant and with it the children were cooking up a new world, recreating the natural world ... And *that* is the way we create the world, with the alphabet, with syllables, with language. I have a theory about karma, that it is transmitted through language; anyone who wants to be confused can read my paper on that topic, it's on the website, then come back and speak to me afterwards, if you dare. The paper is called "Personal Agency Across Generations: Evolutionary Psychology or Religious Belief?"

The way people speak, their speech manner, says a lot about their culture, their evolution. If you go to India, you will notice that they have a totally different way of speaking than we do. Generally, they speak with much more delicacy, sometimes in a roundabout sort of way. Maybe you get frustrated at



times, when it is hard to understand: what are they talking about, why are they beating around the bush? Also, they use their hands. Many people can fake an Indie accent; I can't. There is this beautiful flowing, a flow of words, with the hands moving along with them. This is an example of how evolution takes place in a particular culture. This is not just about transmission of information from one individual to another, it's not like there is some genetic variant. It's a way of speaking, cultivated over centuries, of a people who tried to use language with a kind of sweetness and reverence, to express themselves in speech through gently flowing, creative movements of their bodies. That is a kind of trait of a civilization which you can't really fake. But you could cultivate it in a lifetime, and that is part of what this is about. In this practice you not only cultivate ways of speaking through mantra; you also do the gestures, like offering gestures, gestures that are very beautiful and sweet. I don't know if we'll get to them this weekend. But eventually we'll get to the gestures, gestures with the hands, and also the ways they move their heads.

I think that these qualities, which are qualities of awareness, can be cultivated on a population-wide scale. There are some people, some individuals, who are brought up in a family, clan or cultural environment which already has spent many generations cultivating these qualities, and maybe they have a head start compared to the rest of us. But I don't think so, I don't think that's all there is to individual karma. Because individual karma isn't just your environment. It's what you choose in your environment, what you want to be,

specifically. Your mother, your father and your family and social environment represent many potentialities, provide many models. And each parent and each individual bring in with them their whole unconscious, their whole extended families. You can be like anybody in there, in some particular way. Who you become may be a function, a mix between your genome and your many unconscious imprints. Out of that number of possibilities, of combinations and recombinations, you create your own little version, you create something new, something that has never been before. And in the creation process of combining and recombining elements you appropriate it, as your own self.

I think that people can become enlightened. But enlightenment is a big word. And there are many kinds of enlightenment in this tradition. We should be clear and careful not to romanticize, not to think that because somebody has a really good temperament that means they are enlightened. It could be just that, they have a good temperament, maybe they got really good parenting, this does happen. I don't know if I have met anybody like that; but some people are better at parenting than others. I may have taken my sample from a skewed population. But, nonetheless, it is not *that* skewed, to be honest.

So, there are some people who by temperament and by upbringing have a head start, and it's easier for them. But then maybe, also, some people have something inside of them, some kind of creative active genius, and they choose to be a certain way. People can be completely like their family members, or completely different from them, or just like some weirdo in the family who

everybody hates. There is always a very powerful individual element to the intergenerational transmission ... Anyway, the idea here is to understand that when we are taking in the mantra we are not just praying in the traditional sense. We are actually trying to recreate the world, we are trying to re-transplant the world vision of our mentor, or of a previous generation, through creative affirmative speech energy. So it's a powerful act we are trying to do here.

There is one other point about mantra, a simple and practical point worth noting. It is because we are such speaking animals -- because it's very easy for us to just talk -- that we are always talking. We are talking either to other people or in our heads. We are talking all the time! And it gets tiring after a while. But I think this is mostly because of what we are saying, or because of the feelings that are triggered by what we are saying. We can use speech in a more positive way. We can say mantras instead. We can also say mantras when we are tired of meditation.

Once you get the mantra practice, and you become better at it, you'll reach a point when you can use the mantra easily, as if pushing a button and this whole energy invades your mind. In a sense, this is a powerful form of therapy like what is called "thought substitution" in cognitive therapy, which involves substituting all the negative thoughts with positive thoughts.

Sound is very deeply held in the Hindu yoga tradition. One of the reasons for this focus on recitation and sound is based on a notion of revelation: the

Vedas, the oldest Hindu scriptures, were revealed through seers, or Rishis, who heard the speech of the gods. Also, among many yoga practitioners there is this notion that certain sounds resonate in specific chakra centers. But Buddhist tradition does not go there; it does not recognize any magical connection between specific sounds and specific chakras.

If you feel things in your body where a chakra is supposed to be, what you are feeling is not necessarily your chakra. A chakra is part of a very subtle energy feedback system that can be open only through extended practice. Of course, some of us may be very sensitive. And in the Kalachakra tradition for some people our central channel system is always open. But not so for most of us. Within the Buddhist tantric tradition the idea is that you can choose among the different energy centers where you want to have an influence, and you can put the mantra there, for whatever purpose.

In the Medicine Buddha practice, at this level we work mainly with the heart. If you start practicing with the focus somewhere else in the body you can build a tendency to accumulate a lot of energy that can go off-balance; so at this point we focus usually, very simply, on the heart. And so you find yourself reciting a mantra while visualizing it in your heart, as is traditionally done. As in our opening meditations, you imagine your body as a body of light, a meditative bubble, and then inside at your heart there is the moon disc or the sun disc, and in there is a mantra rosary that is either spinning around or just sitting there, on your heart.

There is a long and a short version of the mantra of the Medicine Buddha.  
The short version goes, in Sanskrit:

**"Tadyatha, Om Baishajya Bhaishajya Maha Bhaishajya Raja Samudgate Svaha!"**

**"Tadyatha"** - means "just like that" or "just like you."

**"Om Baishajya, Baishajya"** -- Baishajya is the word for "healer" or "medicine." You repeat this part of the mantra, each time for a different kind of healing -- for example healing the body, healing the mind, healing the spirit.

**"Maha Bhaishajya"** means "the supreme King of healers" or "Model of healers."

**"Raja Samudgate"** means "may I be like you."

**"Svaha"** is often used at the end.

There is a lovely song of this, that has been recorded by a French guy, who also actually sings it.

Tibetans pronounce the mantra differently. They didn't know Sanskrit, they didn't translate the mantra; they thought they were saying the mantras in Sanskrit. The Tibetan language is very different. There are some sounds that are very hard to pronounce, and very hard for our Western minds to understand their own way of pronouncing Sanskrit. There is a belief that it is a blessing to say the mantra in the language you heard it originally. If your teacher is Tibetan, if you hear the teaching from Gelek Rinpoche, it's good to say it his way, in Tibetan, because it will have somehow a transmission or a feeling of his presence when you say it. If that works for you, say it the Tibetan:

***"Tayata Om, Bekandze, Bekandze Maha Bekandze Radza Sumudgate Soha."***

I prefer to say it in Sanskrit because it works better in the mouth, that is if you pronounce the Sanskrit properly. That is your choice. You can say it in English too. In any case, I think what's important is to actually understand what you are saying. If you know what you are saying you are more focused on it as you say it, and thus you are increasing its impact.

If you find that as you recite the mantra you feel funny energy in there, like fightness, then don't do it. In Kundalini practice, and in some of the more popularized Western chakra systems, the view is that we shouldn't monkey around with our chakras until our perception is clear and our energy is

balanced. Otherwise, we might just mess things up, we might tie the knots in there even more tightly; we might get into a power trip and end up in a struggle with our own nervous system. I am not saying this is a risk for you specifically, but the risk is there, for people in general. The Buddhist approach is you prepare your mind, with visualization and mantra recitation, as you focus not so much on a specific part of your body, but on your body as a whole -- or perhaps just your heart, as a way to illuminate and connect, to feel the heart center opening. This is called an *unexcelled preliminary*. And the point with this preliminary is to prepare for performing some psychosurgery on our nervous system. You first start by purifying your perception of who you are and what your nervous system is, why it is there, what it's made of, and what your universe is. If, on the other hand, you are busy practicing with the chakras, trying to open up your chakra system in your body while in your mind you are imagining that the world is a terrible place filled with awful people who are going to hurt you, you are not going very far, you are just going to scare yourself!

The first thing you do is you create the crucible. And that is the mandala. The text of the Vajrapanjara tantra says, that it is through the circle of the mandala that we bind the blissful art. So, we create a mandala. The vision of the mandala provides a sacred space, a safe space, a space that is totally protected. We bring that safe space into our body. And then we can begin to work on our nervous system, in a safe way.

All that is quite an accomplishment: creating a safe place and bringing it into your body so you can start shaping your self as you want it. And essentially, it is the result of a very simple tantric practice of visualization, of mantra, to create a strong bond with a really positive role model. That is what makes the place safe.

Safety is key in the context of transformation. And safety comes into this practice in many forms. For example, when we do White Tara, who does many cool things, you'll learn how she puts shells around you to protect you from the outside world. And so she builds a firewall of shells around you. And the shells have little lotuses with razor-sharp petals zapping away negativity that comes your way, zapping the bad energy, purifying; she helps you purify the outer world, she helps you transform the elements of your outer world. Then you are ready to start working on your nervous system.

This is a very elegant therapeutic system. If you are a psychologist and you are trying to work with trauma, this is the kind of way to do it, by creating this sort of impenetrable, secure environment, because with safety and warmth your nervous system is at its most open and workable, and you don't fight with it.

There are different ways you can work with mantra. Is it best to say them aloud? The tradition is to say them out loud, especially when you are in communion, and you get that special sense of all the voices together, chanting. Chanting in community is quite a powerful group experience, social experience. But when you are on your own, it is considered to be a matter of personal



preference: you can say the mantra out loud if you like; or you could say it subvocally, like a whisper to yourself; or you can say it in your mind, just think it.

Then, to go into an even more cool or subtle level, don't even say it in your mind, just envision it inside your body, somewhere, inside your heart, and just read the mantra, read it off the heart ... There are all sorts of different ways to practice with mantra.

There is a rationale for saying mantras out loud, based on the fact that when we say mantras we are also influencing the breath, because in order to say the mantras the breath has to go in and out. Of course, you could link up the mantra with your breath, imaginatively. For example, when I breathe in I am going to say "*Om mani padme hum*" and when I breathe out I am going to say, "*Om tare tuttare ture svaha.*" You can do it imaginatively, see it in your mind, it doesn't have to be through the sound, literally.

An interesting study that was made back in the 1980s will bring all this more down to earth. A group of researchers were studying musicians' brains, comparing musicians' brains to ordinary people's brains. Specifically, they were comparing how musicians' brains vs. non-musicians' brains process music.

Let me give you a bit of background. We humans have a right brain and a left brain. For most people, the left brain is where the language cortex is, where the syntax module lives. And the right brain is where the music module is, where we break down prosody, sound, rhythm, and the vocal and sonic qualities of speech of a person's voice. In evolutionary terms, that is a very old

skill, very simple mammals needed that kind of skill to recognize a child's cry, or a mother's purr, or whatever. On the other hand, the ability to encode specific elements in speech didn't come along until much later, two million years ago, with the syntax module.

Going back to the research on musicians, the researchers observed the brains of the two groups as they listened to music using a PET scan, which just shows changes in glucose as neurons are activated and operating in a particular part of the brain. The significant difference they found was that when an average person listens to music the music module lights up while the syntax module, the verbal cortex, stays quiet. And that explains why listening to music is relaxing, because you stop thinking, you are busy listening to the music. Maybe there are a couple of words that come up here and there; but you are not so focused on the words, just the music. However, when musicians listen to music, both parts of their brains are active: their syntax module, which is much more active than normal, and their music module as well.

What is the formula, what is the analysis of this? My own analysis of this is that a network linkage is established between the part of the brain that processes vocal sounds and other sounds like music, and the analytic part of the brain that can slice sounds, symbols and everything down to the level of precision and minuteness of syntax. So you figure, how many sounds (if you can think in terms of sounds), how many different kinds of rhythms are there (if you can think in terms of rhythms), seventeen, thirty, fifty? ... Now, think about how

many sentences there are compared to just sound phrases. That's a whole other scale! In language there is much more information-encoding ability, and therefore there is also much more analytic ability to break down a sentence into subject, object, pronoun, verb, active clause, etc. So, in the case of the musician, the analytic capacity of the syntax module is applied to the music module. And that's what gives the musicians the capacity to think analytically about music, and to recognize, "Okay that is that part of the song," and "Look they are repeating part A and then it goes into part B and they are repeating it again ... Now imagine if we took it apart and put it back together in this other way ..." So being able to analyze sound is breaking it down in sound units and putting them together in a new and creative way. That is what music composers do: they take sounds, and they break them down into pieces, phrases, notes ... and they put them together in a new and creative way. The capacity to compose comes from the syntax module.

Notice, we humans don't play music the way birds sing songs. A bird sings one song. That's it, one song. We can sing billions of songs, an infinite number of songs -- and that is because of our syntax module, our capacity to break down something like language or sound in pieces and then make something new out of the pieces.

Something very important came out of that research study. It provided a very important insight about the brain's model for self-regulation. How does the brain support its capacity for self-regulation? We now know that when we are

paying attention, energy flows in our neurons. And as energy and blood flow in and around our neurons, our neurons grow. They grow and they sprout connections to neighboring neurons. So, in short, by paying attention to something we establish new neural network connections.

If we pay a lot of attention to music we can establish network connections, specialized network connections, I suppose through the corpus callosum (that separates the two parts of the brain) all the way over to the mid-brain, then all the way to the other side of the brain. That set of connections essentially allows us to upgrade a part of our brain that otherwise would have remained in a very old stage of development, a stage that we humans share with much older and more primitive animals. And so we get an upgrade, to a human level of development.

So neural integration works by bringing awareness. And by bringing linguistic awareness to different functions within our nervous system we integrate them in our higher consciousness and our powerful linguistic capacity to analyze, assess, create, and control information.

This is why in the tantras we access the nervous system by placing syllables, seed syllables in different places in our body. By putting the seed syllables we are actually creating network connections between our verbal brain (that can consciously control things) and our intuitive nervous system (that isn't consciously controlled or regulated, it just does whatever it does). And in this

way we create neural linkages that will allow us later to regulate our nervous system.

This simple use of mantras that we recite as affirmations is just the start of the process. It's essentially buying into the system and getting a sort of jumpstart. Eventually, what we need to do is to develop our mind's creative linguistic capacity and link it to all our body processes. Then we can use it to guide and manage the energies in our system. That is partly done by the way in which language hooks up to our syntax module, which is the analytic part of our brain.

The idea with mantras is to link up, not just the verbal syntax module, but also the capacity to control the breath. That happens through the smart vagus, which allows you to go deeper in your reach, the reach of your verbal mind. And not only you can control your breathing, but eventually, with lots of practice, you can control all the functions of your autonomic nervous system. So mantra practice can take you really very far out.

OM AH HUM are the core seed syllables in mantra practice. Interestingly enough, to go back to this issue of sound, the magic power of sound: this is not such a simple issue.

In fact, the original seed syllable, called the '*udgita*,' the original sound, OM, contains three sounds, A - U - M, that make up OM. In the second stage of tantra, the perfection stage, these sounds are actually defined as the three sounds that the breath makes, first when you inhale, or as air goes in the body,

second when the breath pauses, and third when the breath goes out. The idea here is that sound is, simply put, the natural resonance of the body.

Sounds like this wind up reflecting the beauty and elegance of the Sanskrit language. Sanskrit, in its discovery, leads to the origin of modern linguistics. In fact, when the Jesuits discovered and started studying Sanskrit with their Brahmin teachers in India, some of them, those among them aware of language, saw how the Sanskrit alphabet was structured, organized, based on the parts of our vocal equipment. Vowels were coded to specific parts of the vocal apparatus; and consonants were broken down into those with a sound made by the tongue, or by the lips, or by the throat, or the epiglottis, in the way of a scientific system, one that is perfectly natural and very simple. Sounds are made by the body; so if you want to understand the sounds you have to understand them as they relate to the parts of the body that make them. Nobody in the West had made that connection until the discovery of Sanskrit. So, as the movement of air, language becomes the manipulation of air through our windpipes. We are manipulating air, that is what we are doing, we are manipulating body sounds. And the rest of language is not nature, it's culture. Sounds in certain frequencies and certain rhythms are coming from certain parts of our body, and as they do they are given a certain sense, a certain meaning, by the mind, from our cultural development -- and then it all comes together!

It's like in the Walkabout in Australia: out of our nature and our ability to control our bodies, we are creating capacity to encode information -- social information, cultural information -- and to convey it across generations. In this context the information isn't just about where the nearest Starbucks is; it is about how you can actually live a happy life in a healthy, happy human body in society. That is really important information, the kind mother should have given us, if mother had it to begin with.

I should talk a little bit more about *requesting constancy*, the sixth step in the Sevenfold Offering. The idea of constancy is psychological. In psychology, in child development, they talk about how children become more stable cognitively and emotionally when they have a stable mental representation, a mental image of the parent, so that when the parent leaves the room they know they still have a parent, they don't feel abandoned. By developing a mental image of a parent we reassure ourselves that we still have a parent even when we don't see them. This is, in fact, what we are doing in this practice. We develop a mental image of a mentor, a role model, so that even when the mentor is not there, we still know we have a mentor.

As a therapist, I can tell you that some people come in to see you and just naturally connect to you, while for others it takes years to connect. For the latter, every time they leave the consultation room you, the therapist, disappear, you don't exist for them, or maybe you turn into a monster. It can take years until

such a patient is finally able to say, "I know you are there for me, I know you are there, even when you are not around." That is the point of constancy.

Constancy is linked to a really important power of the organism: to internalize the presence of another. This is a very important capability for a social animal, because if we are alone, or more exactly if we *feel* alone, we get freaked out, we are pretty helpless and defenseless. Whereas if we know there are others with us then we have that, we have the fact that they care for us. And then we feel safer, more confident.

Constancy is not just being able to create a mental image of the parent or the mentor and then take it around with us. Constancy is about taking with us what we have learned from them, what they have mastered. What is that? All of us have learned some strengths from our parents, otherwise we probably wouldn't be here. But we get from them the bitter with the better. Parents know some things because they have been around the block for a while longer, but they don't know everything. So we learn from them, and unfortunately we get the garbage as well.

Now, at this point in our life, we get the opportunity to redo this educating and learning, and we get to re-filter the learning, now that we're better prepared, because we know more about what we're looking for, we are looking for a very special kind of parenting, parenting that leads to a whole new way of being, one that is not stuck in the stress mill, constantly rehearsing trauma or repeating nightmares.



How do you live in this totally different way, a way that is not so common? First, you have to find somebody that lives that way. Then you make them your new parent, psychically, to guide you. You have to grow up and take that parenting into yourself. So this is not just about choosing an image or something to pray to, something you can fake. Here you are actually going into the very fabric of your being. You can do it with a mental image or a verbal image, a sound or seed syllable. Ultimately what you get is the same: the capacity to be in your mind and body so as to shape your mind and nervous system in ways that are more adequate, healthier, happier and more sustainable.

There is a specific mantra for purifying negativities, the Vajrasattva mantra. It's a one-hundred syllable mantra. It says things like, "Make me abundant, make me happy and blissful ... make me unwavering, make me firm, make my mind brilliant." And it ends with, "Never leave me, until I am like you and I don't need you anymore; then you can leave.

It sounds much prettier in Sanskrit:

***"Om Vajrasattva Samayam / Anupalaya / Vajrasattva Tvena / Upadishta  
Drdho Me Bhava / Sutoso Me Bhava / Suposyo Me Bhava / Anurakto Me Bhava  
/ Sarva Siddhim Me Prayaccha / Sarva Karma Sucha / Me Cittam Shreya Kuru***

***Hum Ha Ha Ha Ho / Bhagavan / Sarva Tathagata Vajra / Ma Me Munca /  
Vajri Bhava / Maha Samaya Sattva / Ah Hum Phat***

If you want to learn more about Vajrasattva, there is Lama Yeshe's beautiful book, originally called "The Tantric Path to Purification" and now published as "Becoming Vajrasattva." There is a Vajrasattva meditation on the website of the Nalanda Institute, in the section of guided meditations, under "The Flow of Inspiration: Becoming the Heroic Altruist." Also, the Vajrasattva mantra is on YouTube. But this is a little over our heads right now. It is important to go gradually, build one block at a time.

The last step in the *Sevenfold Offering is dedication*. So, retracing the last few steps: We take the mentor -- the role model, the deity, it's all the same -- into our self, and we merge, so that the mentor can guide us on our way to Enlightenment: "Look, there it is, there is your genius mind, your open mind, right there, right in front of you ..." And, as the mentor points to somewhere within the vastness of the universe of my mind and body, to those elements, those specific elements that are the building blocks of the mentor's way of being that I want, I can begin to use them for my transformation. The integration begins -- and that is Yoga Tantra. You get that personal blessing, that personal sense that, yes, now you are on target. After you come out of that process, and you sort of reboot your mind and body, your own mind and body that are now integrated into the mentor, you do the *dedication*.

*Dedication* is said to be extremely important. In meditation practice, you should always do two things before and after a session: always begin by setting your motivation right; and always end with a dedication, to your ongoing development process.

The reason is best explained with my jam canning analogy. When you are making jam, you want to preserve only the best part of the pot. You get really good berries, you clean them, you put them in a pot, boil them, skim the foam off the top and take all the impurities out, put them in a jar and store them away, sealed and preserved. You have preserved them so you can call on them whenever you need them, like money in the bank. That is jam capitalism. And this is spiritual capitalism: When you have positive energy and positive experience from a meditation, that has the power to transform, you don't just get off the cushion and out the door into the world, back to the old habits and let it all spill out, join the world of stress and insanity, and get angry. Because, that is what will happen. As Shantideva said, paraphrasing, a moment of anger destroys eons of amassing merit. It's like you are working very hard to become a wonderful person, then you get angry for whatever reason, you react badly and take it out on somebody else that has nothing to do with your anger and end up ruining a good relationship, or doing something destructive, stupid; and then you feel like a jerk, you just don't feel well anymore, because it all goes the wrong way, just like that!

You can stop that sequence of events from happening with a *dedication* at the end of the practice. Think of it this way. The motivation before the meditation is like the fruit that you start out with when making jam. The meditation is what you do with the fruit -- the boiling process, getting rid of the impurities. That's also what you do with Vajrasattva, purification. At the end of many practices, the more elaborate ones, you'd say, "If there have been omissions or mistakes please be lenient." Essentially, it's confession, shorthand for my recognition that I messed up, I didn't do that very well, I'll try harder and do it better next time." Any bad results you let go. But anything you did do well you give yourself full credit for, you do not live in the "pride of ordinariness" as they call it, nothing like "Poor me, I'll never be a Buddha, I am so defiled, of course I had a bad meditation, anything good that came of it is probably just going to be dissipated in the next few hours." No, you don't let that happen.

On the contrary. You say, "I am going to get rid of the negative, I recognize it and acknowledge it, and I let it go. And anything positive I am going to dedicate." And by dedicating it it will grow. It's like depositing your "merit" -- which is the word this tradition uses for positive energy and chemistry, for positive momentum. You can think of it as your positive learning. And you deposit it in the bank of the minds of all enlightened beings. The bank, if you can envision it, is like an ocean. You take all your merit there, where it is kept. The bank has deposit insurance, like the FDIC that insures your financial deposits. And it is never going to go broke because all the Buddhas have put their

positive energy there. You can safely go back and draw out from it if you have had some indiscretions. It will be there for you. So save your positive energy.

That is part of *dedication*, at the simplest level. You take the time to make the mental effort to seal your practice with a dedication; to say, as God said, in the Judeo-Christian tradition when He created Heaven and Earth, "It's good." In the same way, you say to yourself, "I created this meditation, and it's good!" That's it. Then you move on, to your life, and don't get all confused about it.

There is also a more advanced form, or understanding, of *dedication*. Taking your mentor into yourself is not just dedicating your positive energy to your own wellbeing. In the Mahayana sense, or the tantric sense, you dedicate the good results of your practice to becoming like your mentor, an effective being, so that you can transform yourself and your crazy environment, and make a difference, improve on the environment. In addition, in tantra it's not just becoming an altruist that will make your life and the world a better place, it's doing it quickly, quickly! This is something else that makes it very attractive to our Western culture: Quickly, quickly, I want to become like you quickly, quickly!

So you take the mentor in: "I am going to keep you inside of me, in the fabric of my being, until I become like you; that is the purpose of taking you in, so that I can be like you." We become like our mentors, and through them, like buddhas. And that is what we are going to do, we are going to become Buddhas, we are going to be the enlightened parents of the world, we are going to parent ourselves, others and take good care of all. If this is the

practice, that is the aim. If you want to become like buddhas, you want to be able to take care of the world around you. You want not just to feel like you think you should, but you actually have the ability to take care of yourself and the world around you. The world is becoming a better place as you are becoming a better person. This is the quick path. And that is the idea of the dedication.

Another important part of *dedication* is its reach across generations. When you internalize the mentor, you internalize him or her with their whole lineage. Their lineage becomes your lineage, you embody that ancestral lineage. And when you do the dedication you include this lineage, which means dedicating all of that momentum to continuing your practice as part of an intergenerational project. All the contemplative traditions on planet Earth that we know of have been trying to calm down humans' destructive emotions and civilize homo sapiens so that humans and other beings can get along, do useful and constructive things together. At this point in time human civilization has been developing for at least seven millennia, and probably more than that. So, now, as part of this lineage, as part of this particular branch of the human family tree I am going to carry that legacy on and I am going to make the world a better place, I am going to see everyone become a Buddha, male or female. I am going to work hard for everyone to become aware of their inner Buddha, their inner genius for altruism and self transcendence.

And that is, in brief, the idea behind *dedication*. It's really lovely, and in a

way it's also quite simple. And so, I am dedicating my self to an end, to an outcome, to becoming like you my mentor, my guide. That means that I am also dedicating my self to a method, to be like you by practicing this particular method. This is the method that I have chosen to practice, because if I follow it I will reach the outcome quickly, quickly, in one to sixteen lifetimes, as opposed to three incalculable eons. This is the method for me, because I am in a rush and I am ready to do a lot in a short period of time.

## Chapter Seven

### Coarse and Subtle Self-Creation: Imagery, Dignity & the Subtle Body

We have been talking about visualization lately. And today we'll talk about subtle visualization, which is the next phase, the subtle imagery phase. Before we begin I just want to say we really need to be doing this, right? Because there is so much craziness out there. And it all starts with people just like us, but with nervous systems that get overloaded with negativity, and they lose their human capacity. You see the price of the emotional underdevelopment, of the emotional poverty of our culture. We have an incredibly wealthy, stimulating, vibrant culture, but we have this emotional poverty, we are sort of lacking in basic emotional intelligence and a sense of connectedness that makes it possible for us to stay human and work together. So, *'Om mani padme hum, hrih.'*

I hope you all got the White Tara practice script. I improvised a little just to shorten the process. There is also a long and a brief version of the script on the Nalanda website that you can use. Now the time has come for you to try out some new tools.

As I promised, the Tibetan doctors are coming. We are moving now from the Medicine Buddha to his partner, White Tara. She is used just as much in the medical system and the Medicine Buddha, although more for emotional and



spiritual healing, and longevity, than for physical healing. She brings with her some very unusual and interesting tools. Last week I mentioned the firewall built of shells that she helps us put around us to protect ourselves, which is a lovely image. Today we'll get into it a bit more. And I'll introduce you to the idea of the subtle body with its the central channel, the subtle nervous system, and how it begins to figure in the practice, play a role. We'll begin with a very simple way.

Before moving forward, let's do a quick recap of this term. We have gone through the *Sevenfold Offering*, we have talked about the basic steps of role modeling, of visualization, and how they work. We talked a little bit about the linguistic, the neurolinguistic and psycholinguistic aspects of this process, and how to tap into our capacity to use language to generate images that, then, create a new software in our minds, a software for who we are, what we are, and what's happening in our world.

Part of the power we get from this tradition is learning how to recreate ourselves and our world, at least on a perceptual level. Now we have reached the point where we ask, where does the seven-step process of role modeling take us, what does it get us?

As I mentioned a bit earlier, the *unexcelled yoga tantras*, which are the highest, or optimal, integral process teachings, have two stages: the *creation stage*, for creating the imagination we need for our work together; and then there is the *perfection stage*, the realization stage.

In the creation stage, we start by learning to use our imagination in the meditative process to help transform our self. Then we create the ideal healing space, a space where we are protected from all the noise within and around us. Once we're feeling safe we can start to work, to work on re-envisioning and re-building our body and our nervous system. We try to establish a good connection to our nervous system, we get on good speaking terms with our nervous system.

We already talked a bit about that. And we talked about the research with musicians, how the left and the right sides of their brains grow together with practice, how practice integrates the older and more primeval functions like hearing to the newer functions like language, and as a result the sort of mammal grunt-and-sound system gets upgraded from normal mammal to super-human level, to musician level, to creative music processing system. So, by connecting the left brain and the right brain we essentially develop a more integrated way of being.

That is a lovely model for how this kind of tantric practice helps us integrate the world of language. This is key, because in the world of language we have a fair amount of control over where our mind goes. But that is not true of the world of emotions, as so many poets, like Matthew Arnold wrote. He wrote about undisciplined squads of emotion ...

We all have lots of undisciplined squads of emotion, and we also have undisciplined imaginations. That is really what nightmares are made of, undisciplined imagination. That is what, in a way, bad trips, bad death trips and much of our suffering is about. It's unnecessary suffering in the everyday world. And it comes from the capacity to vividly imagine the worst things that are going to happen, happen to me, or the ways that people hate me, or the ways that they are going to hurt me. We are so good at imagining such things that we scare the living daylights out of ourselves. We live in trauma, worrying about our relationships with others when actually people are mostly just worrying about their own stuff.

Getting control over our imagination is key. And what we are talking about here is a process for getting control over our imagination and all its underlying processes, even our basic vital processes; like breathing, like autonomic tone. For that we work at a more subtle level, with the subtle body.

Let us look at the basic map of the subtle body, the subtle nervous system. According to the Indic tradition there are four basic descriptive elements here: channels, chakras, winds and drops. These notions are not so easy to translate into Western science terms.

The *central channel* can be described, very, very sketchily, as a straw at a Starbucks café, that level of thickness, that runs from our crown to our pelvis. At the right and left side there are two thinner channels coiling around it. You can think of them as the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, the two

parts of our autonomic nervous system. You can think of them as representing many other things also. Like the solar energies on one side, what wakes us up, and on the other the lunar energies, what puts us to sleep, and also help us digest and heal.

*Chakras* are generally translated as wheels. But "wheel" is too literal a translation. In Sanskrit the word "chakra" is used in many ways. A chakra is an energy center, or at least that is the myth, right? In this context chakra is not so much a center of energy as it is a block of energy. It is actually a knot in our nervous system, where energy is blocked and can't flow.

The *drops*, as I understand them, are some kind of chemical element in our system, some fluid that can be made of neurotransmitters, hormones, neuroendocrine and other endocrine substances.

Finally, *winds*, the last element in the subtle nervous system, are the electrical currents running through the system.

This very old system is being validated by Western science. We know that there are pathways in the nervous system. We know that axons create pathways in the neural system. We know that there are nuclei and other kinds of neural complexes that come together that may be somehow related to chakras ... The point is, in brief, that this really is a pretty full map of the human psychophysiological system, of our subtle molecular psychophysiological system. It is not really comparable to our anatomical maps, we cannot say whether it's a map of the human neuroendocrinological or psycho-neuroendocrinological

or neuroimmunological system, etc. because our normal anatomical maps tend to fragment the different functions of our body-mind. However, organically, all these anatomical systems develop together, they are all tied together. So there is no point in separating them. We will talk about how, in my own weird and whacky view, in my mythology, we can integrate the Western anatomical map of the human central nervous system with the Indic map of the subtle body.

I am trying to place us where we are practice-wise, and to make a distinction among creative imagination practices that prepare us to change ourselves. There are what Tibetans call "extraordinary preliminaries." A preliminary practice prepares us to do a certain kind of work. If you remember the discussion we had earlier about language and neural networks, you know that in this case the preliminaries might be preparing us to increase our awareness of the different body-mind processes that we are not aware of normally; and to start to integrate them.

Exactly how that might be happening we don't know. But let's just say that maybe, at a certain point we're crossing over into a process that goes beyond just controlling our imagination, our perception, our emotional response, or even our behavioral response style. We are talking about controlling the nervous system itself. That means the body-mind state, the chemical states and the energy states within us, all of them. That is where these practices take us. That is the province of the perfection stage of the Tibetan tantric system.

Where are we right now? We are at the bridge between the creation stage and the perfection stage, what is called the fine creation stage, or the subtle creation stage. This is according to Nagarjuna, who is credited in the Buddhist tradition with making this map of the esoteric practices that divides the creation stage into coarse and subtle stages.

In the *coarse creation stage* you are trying to change your normal social role, your image of yourself as a person in the world and your image of the world. So you start by finding who is out there to be a good model, you establish a relationship and you use that relationship to transform your sense of who you are as a social being. We can think of this as taking the mentor within our self. Here we are not just talking about changing our social role in a public sense or in relation to others. We are talking about changing our whole inner being, our body-mind processes, our internal world.

How do we perceive our internal world? What is happening in our internal world? This is the province of the *subtle creation stage*. We are taking our image, our whole imagination of a better world and a better way of being, into our own body-mind, and our nervous system.

Mary Reilly Nichols will tell us that in her tradition people often talk about the body-mind as a temple of divinity. In this context, the operative word is a mandala, which is a sacred space, or a healing space.

Here we are talking about the so-called body mandala, which is the sphere of influence around the body. We want the sphere of influence of our teacher and our own sphere of activity to intersect. We want our own sphere of activity to be increasingly informed by, or coming into the sphere of influence of, the teacher-student relationship. By aligning ourselves that way, we are aligning our way of engaging with the world, the touch tone we are using. In other words, we are going to take the mandala inside, to take the mentor inside.

Normally, our mind-body is filled, populated, by our mom and dad, people that we have relationships with, our traumatic experiences, our demons, the lions, tigers and bears and stuff we fear. Normally when we think of what's inside of us it can seem like a black box, a Pandora's box, there could be anything in there. That is kind of what the unconscious is, where all that stuff you don't know what it is gets stored, parks itself. And, of course, it can't all be good. In fact, part of the reason we often resist this kind of internal work, just like in the case of psychoanalysis, and psychotherapy in general, is that it's dark and dirty in there, it's kind of scary. I don't want to go in there; let me stay focused on what is happening out here instead.

We can change that attitude in therapy, with the help of our therapist. Our therapist is an ally we bring into our personal experience. And so we get to experience our self differently, we get to see our self through the eyes of a friend, an ally who says to us, "You are not so bad, don't worry, you are not so

terrible in there; there are no deep dark secrets, you are a good egg. Maybe you have some neuroses over here, or some trauma over there. But we will work all that out."

That is essentially what we are doing when we do the body mandala practice. I am using the term "body mandala practice" here not in its technical meaning but in general. What I mean is that, when I am in the presence of my mentor, a sacred space is created between us. And that brings a sense of possibility and transformation. I take that sacred space into my body and I start to experience my body sort of through the body of my mentor, as a potential space for transformation, of dialogue with the divine, with the Buddha, with genius. This is "body mandala practice."

So here we are, at the end of the Sevenfold Offering, the seven-step process for role modeling and transformation in the Buddhist tantric tradition. Last session we talked about the last two steps, constancy and dedication. Now the mentor has come into us, inside of us, and we try to feel a sense of merger or identity, we fuse with that other being.

There are other ways of getting there, other practices to do that. One example I have mentioned a few times is given in Bob Thurman's book "Jewel Tree of Tibet." In that particular teaching you imagine the mentor having the Buddha inside. Some practices involve placing images of the mentor, or of the chosen genius, in various places in our body. For example, you can imagine your body as having five Buddhas inside, one on each of the major chakras. I



know, some of you may be thinking that in the yoga system there are seven chakras; there are seven in the Buddhist system also, but practitioners usually keep it to just five.

So, at your crown sits the body Buddha, the Buddha that purifies the body. At the throat is the speech Buddha; at the heart is the perception Buddha or consciousness Buddha; at the navel is the sensation Buddha; at the pelvis is the passion, or emotion, Buddha. This map, this configuration provides a way to think of the nervous system as a distributed set of systems with subsystems. Normally, most of the systems are functioning on autopilot, and most of the autopilot is polluted by stress and trauma, by compulsive, survival-mode functioning. That is the normal state of the nervous system governing our mind-body process. You visualize a Buddha at each of those centers, those chakras, those systems, to purify them and protect them from getting contaminated further. Ultimately, this practice will help transform them into the native geniuses, the pure intelligences and pure awarenesses that they are.

Another visualization practice is to imagine that you are the big Buddha, and inside your body you have all these little Buddhas, these little sub-buddhas or little sub-personalities, it's like you are a family of Buddhas, or a residence, or a hostel, you are a Buddha hostel. These little buddhas are sort of camping out at different places in your nervous system. You imagine some buddhas stationed in your eyes, your ears, and so on.

Many religions have similar practices. I know the Sufis and Hindus do. I don't know if there is anyone here that knows if there are similar practices in Christianity; maybe the Jesuits. What is unique here, again, is the way in which imagery is used. Essentially, our body image is not just our body image as we would perceive it on the mirror, but our internal body image. What's in there? At this point the main thing that we are focusing on in there is the nervous system. Since we are trying to regulate our body we need to regulate our nervous system. Because our nervous system is the regulator of our mind-body functions. That is why in the creation stage we are building a little bit of a bridge to the subtle body. We are talking about building a new body, a Buddha body. We are beginning the process of painting the fine brush strokes of what is inside of our new Buddha body. There is a new Buddha nervous system. And this new Buddha nervous system is our old nervous system, only now it's being run by Buddhas.

How do we visualize the different Buddhas in our nervous system? Each system does it in a different way. If you do it according to this Tibetan system, you do the Guru Puja, the mentor bonding yoga practice. You imagine the five meditative Buddhas, the five wisdom Buddhas, Amitābha, Akshobya, Vairochana, Ratnasambava and Amogasiddhi, sitting at your five main energy centers. The Buddhas are considered to be the heads of the five clans, and, unlike our God, Buddhas have female counterparts. Normally, you envision the Buddhas according to their different color; white, red, blue, yellow, green. Each

Buddha is making a different hand gesture. The colors and other traits of the Buddhas vary across practices. But we won't go into that.

Unlike our monotheistic view of God, our view of only one god and everybody else is second rank, second fiddle, in polytheistic traditions, as in the Indic tradition, in general there is henoteism, meaning that who is in charge changes among the deities. There is a team of deities and the responsibility of who is in charge rotates: one deity runs the show one day, a different one the next, and so on. In the Buddhist tradition they follow that style, that flexible style, sometimes to a point that it can get confusing. In one practice this Buddha is here and in another this Buddha is there. This one has this color or that color as their dominant color. This isn't a simple coding system, like this chakra is always this color, or this Buddha. It's never simple like that. Instead there is a family and there's a team of people and the teams are running things. A specific team may be doing different things at different times. And new teams keep cropping up, for new functions, and more specialized functions.

For now I'd like to keep this very, very simple. You start visualizing the five Buddhas sitting in different places in your body. They become like agents, your agents, your team of agents, and they may specialize in, say, emotions. You can ask the Buddha's emotions team, "Please run my emotions, they are kind of messy." And they begin to run your emotions. In this way you can ask the Buddhas for help in running anything, anything that you need help with.

It is kind of weird, to sit and visualize five Buddhas, say five Taras, sitting in your being. It's complicated. Thinking of any five things inside you is already complicated. But it doesn't need to be. As you move on in your practice and you start to see the visualizations in a more granular way, you replace the Buddha images with seed syllables, syllables that represent the speech and the thought of Buddha. If you take traditional teachings you will get a much simpler version. You will learn how to use seed syllables. You will hear that there is the Buddha of such-and-such; at his crown there is an "OM" and at his throat an "AH" and at his heart a "HUM." In traditional teachings they don't usually bother with the other chakras. The bottom line is that mind is running our system, and the mind itself is being directed by memes. Memes are sort of cultural genes that carry encoded bits of information on culture, on how to live in society. The information in the memes is all distilled down into the seed syllables.

If you were to use English to practice with seed syllables, like "HUM" for example, it would take up a lot of space, three letters worth of space; whereas seed syllables in Sanskrit are almost a single stroke, sometimes with squiggles, but they are very compact and vertical. They are very easy to visualize inside of our central channel, which is quite thin, like a Starbucks straw. You can easily put the seed syllables in Sanskrit inside that straw because of the way they are structured.

I prefer to use the exclamation point. My reason for that is first, of course it's easy to visualize it in the central channel; and second, the exclamation point is used to mark the most important, it stands as an abbreviation of the most important. So it stands very well for the syllable "AH", sometimes considered the most important syllable in Buddhist tantric tradition, " AH" is the original sound, with a slightly different emphasis from the "OM" in the Hindu tradition. "AH" is often abbreviated by a single stroke, called the linear 'A' or short 'a', and it looks a lot like an exclamation point. That is how I got the idea.

So you visualize exclamation points at the five main chakras, at the crown, throat, heart, below the navel and the pelvis. They are really seed syllables but we are abbreviating them as little "a" syllables.

You can always abbreviate the syllables. You can also shorten the white "OM" to 'o' on your crown chakra, the red "AH" to "a" in your throat, the blue "HUM" or "U" at your heart. And it works. I think it's important to make it very simple visually.

Could we then move from using syllables to just colors? Yes, we could. But the main reason why we use verbal symbols is to link up to our verbal cortex, to the verbal processing system. The special thing here about the verbal processing system is that it gives us clarity and control. So if you are not just interested in a fuzzy enlightenment, if you want to be clear about what you are actually running, then you want to tie in your language system, don't leave it out. This is not mysticism -- or maybe it's language mysticism?... Color and

language come very close here. Like when we are using exclamation points, because an exclamation point of emerald light is about as close as you can get to a splotch of emerald. So it's really just a concept.

I am reminded here of the abbreviation for one of the buzzwords for the Unexcelled tantras, "quickly quickly ..." And I am thinking, "that is good advice for me right now; try to get through the rest of this, quickly quickly."

I want to mention another research study that is really interesting in terms of imagery and cerebral laterality. This was a right brain vs. left brain study, about which side of the brain is dominant at any one time. This is some of the work by Richard Davidson; I think he used Mathieu Ricard as a research subject in this study, showing that we can neutralize and override very quickly negative affect experiences, negative traumatic situations or memories, by bringing to mind a positive image. What happens is that when you have a mentally created positive image, the left periorbital cortex, that part of the left prefrontal cortex that is around the orbit of your eye, lights up.

So, part of the value of building this inner map of yourself, of having a consciously imagined map of yourself and the world you live in, is not just to connect to the more primal parts of the nervous system, the parts that we access through the right brain; but also to connect to the left brain to activate positive affect.

Let's have a very short review of the brain. The left brain is activated when we visualize. And we can make up fantasies that are a lot of fun. Because there is a part of our mind that can imagine just what we want, and it seems it knows also how to tune out everything else. That is how entertainment works. In a way this visualization practice capitalizes on that same capacity of the brain. At the same time we are linking up to negative affect and we are also enhancing our positive affect. And so we activate both the right brain and the left brain. With this practice we learn to activate both sides of the brain in different ways, including ways that allow us to work with traumatic material or feelings with a sense of positive presence, of optimism, of positive affect. Because when the left brain is activated we tend to be more optimistic and outward-going. This stuff really does work. And it's interesting how it works. But now we need to move on.

Today we are talking about the subtle creation stage. How do we know if we should proceed to the subtle creation stage, how do we know when we are ready? We are ready when we start to see things *vividly*. It's like we are not just imagining that maybe Tara is here, or maybe it is the Medicine Buddha. We actually feel like we are talking to a person. "Oh, the Medicine Buddha has come to tea." Or, "White Tara has come to help me." But we don't lose sight that this is a simulation.

You actually start to see it as if it's real. The distinction between the normal loops that we take to be reality, the normal mental constructions that we build

in our mind with our imagination, in short what we think it's really out there, and something new. We start to see differently, the visualizations start to feel sort of real, as real, so real it's like the line between our ordinarily perceived reality and our visualization blurs; like an artist who after a lot of painting starts to look at the world in a different way. The world starts to become a little bit more fuzzy and more translucent. You see all the shades of color, and how all the shades and colors are put together. Your work becomes more vivid and it seems more real. The boundary between what you are creatively imagining on the one hand, and, on the other, what you are passively revising, or reprocessing and reproducing, becomes blurry. At that point, they say, you will be able to sit in Times Square for 24 hours and just see the Mandala. It's like you will be designing, building your own internal billboard! ... Honestly though, even if it lasts for only a few moments when you have an experience of vividness, a wow! experience, like when you are watching a video or something like that, is a sign of success, a sign of clearer focusing.

Part of the reason why this visualization practice is difficult is because, normally, when you start to use your imagination, to daydream, you start to fall asleep. This happens because when we visualize we are activating the right hemisphere, that's the dominant visual hemisphere, which tends to start to get us sleepy and change our level of consciousness. We have to learn how to go into that state and still stay clear. It's like hypnosis in some way, going into a



state that feels like a trance but it's actually a state of deep relaxation, and deep clarity.

In any case, when we become able to reach a level of calm enough to really engage our right brain, our sensory motor processing brain, we start to feel things that we are imagining as if they were really there. Essentially, what we are doing is we are running our perception system. Sort of like in that TV series that was popular in the 1960s, that had the line, "We control the horizontal, we control the vertical." I think it was "The Twilight Zone." Except that now it's no longer the Twilight Zone, it's the Clear Light Zone! You control the horizontal, you control the vertical; you are becoming the producer of your own inner movie. And that inner movie is your own life.

Vividness is one key element, a clear signal that you are ready to move on. Once you get a general sense of vividness, you can focus on the details. But that is not so important at this point. Just remember that vividness a key sign to move on.

The other of course, is the opposite of vividness.

The first time I got a White Tara initiation was at Amherst. I got it from Tara Tulku, a much beloved lama known as the road workers' lama. He came from a very poor family and he used to love to hang out with working Tibetans. And when he was teaching this very simple low-level White Tara tantra, Tara Tulku departed from the traditional teaching and gave a very brief, five or six minute-

long discussion about the most extremely subtle subtleties of the highest schools of Buddhist philosophies. Why did he do that? I will try to explain.

He started talking about the individual as a conceptually consensual designation. Who are we as people? As post moderns we are aware of the notion that human beings are socially constructed; that a personhood grows and develops out of the interactions between our self on the one side, and our parents, the world, and so on; or something like that. But the highest school of philosophy says that a person is a designation made in relation to mind-body systems, but a person is *not* the mind-body systems. A person is what we call a person -- what we designate within our mind-body systems as the "I."

What he was saying is that the essence of the practice is not just that you imagine Tara in front of you, or that eventually you come to imagine your self as Tara. The essence of the practice is that you take your sense of 'I' , your word 'I' that you normally attach to your normal sense of your body and your normal body image, and you move it, you shift the cursor over and attach it to this Tara thing and you say, "I am White Tara." This is a key step. From the tradition's point of view, this shift of "I" is doing some very important subtle linguistic programming. You are mixing your normal unconscious identification, the old, traumatized, very specific narrow sense of self, and you are expanding it, de-reifying your old self image, making it transparent and clear that you do create your self -- you do! -- you are who you say you are. That is the way it is in this tradition. In Western philosophy we have "I think, therefore I am" from Descartes. Well, in this

school the equivalent is, "I am what I say I am" or "I say I am, therefore that is what I am."

Once you have a vivid sense of Tara in front of you, your next challenge is to take that Tara into you and try to embody it, try it on for size as your own space suit, as your new prosthetic self. That is part of the vividness. I am not just having a vivid sense that Tara is in front of me; I am having a vivid sense that, "wow, I look like Tara."

So vividness is one signal to move on. The second is the so-called, "divine pride," or "Buddha pride." I call it "dignity of enlightenment," or the "dignity of enlightened being." What is it?

Earlier we heard advice from the Vajrapanjara Tantra that says, "It is the circle of the mandala that binds the blissful art." That means that establishing a safe space to create a better image of ourselves and the world allows us to tap into our blissful nervous system, so that we feel safe and strong, so we can relax and feel bliss. This refers us to the practice of vivid imagery: by vividly re-imagining ourselves we actually reprogram our perception software and recreate our virtual reality simulation of who we are in the world. In a sense, that is our operating system of who we are in the world. And don't kid yourselves, we all live in a bubble; hopefully it's interactive and open.

Then, the Vajrapanjara Tantra says, "Through union with the dignity of an enlightened being, enlightenment will not be far." This sentence refers us to practice cultivating the so-called "divine pride" that we need to build our

capacity to re-experience our sense of self in relation to this vision of a better way of being. We need to be able to fully identify with it, and to own this new sense of self, one that is translucent, transparent, as much as we would our normal sense of self.

We do that by taking the word "I" and putting it on White Tara. That is the first step of the divine pride practice. Then, remember, as I have said before, that the constructed mental image of a Buddha body -- for example a Tara body -- is not a Buddha; it is a constructed mental image. What is the real Buddha in this system? The real Buddha is the mind that knows the true nature of reality and is blissfully open to it and blissfully embraces it. The real dignity is to meditate on the emptiness of the Tara body that you have identified with.

So, first, you become Tara: "Now, I am Tara." And then you become a real Buddha by recognizing its emptiness: "I am Tara, and I am totally empty." Then you begin to develop what is called the "sense of selflessness." In other words, you just get used to being open.

Geri and I were sitting at "Le Pain Quotidien" yesterday. Some guy there was saying, "Keep the center open." He's a very smart guy, actually; that's what we are trying to do. Normally, we attach our sense of self to an image, a memory, an emotion, a word, whatever ... And then this sense of self becomes heavy, it feels like we're dragging around a ton of bricks, or a ball and chain, as stand-ins for our mind and our capacity for growth. Our Buddha nature is

chained to this silly little fetish, this living thing, this mini-concept of our self, this much reduced self-image that we squeeze our self into.

To get rid of that little limiting self we go to the other extreme. Now are learning how to find the largest ego we can possibly have -- and that is the selfless ego. That is an ego that can relate to everything and anything, that can be open to anything, process anything and work with anything. *That* is a big ego.

Once your ego hooks on specific content, whatever and however elevated that content is, even if it is Tara, it is actually limiting your system -- and your world. Because when your ego identifies with Tara you are here, you are White and you are Tara, you are female and you can relate to being Tara, but you are excluding yourself from every other point of view. You might as well be back in your old body-mind. In that case it would probably be better to envision yourself as a caring and loving mother. That is always a good meditation, but, nonetheless, it is not the real deal, it does not give you the full benefit.

True Buddha pride is knowing that we are all enlightened, and that you have a little space, a wave, in the field of enlightenment. The best way for you to expand that space and use it effectively is to try to tap into everybody else's space of enlightenment, something like that. Anyway, the linguistic mode helps you accomplish that. Because, in this case, not only you can drag the cursor of the 'I' and put it on White Tara; you can also drag the cursor of the 'I' and put it on the experience of radical openness -- and say "Yes, that is me."

Let's go back a bit and look at this from another view. Remember, when we talked about the mind clearing practices in our second year, we talked about the "spacious equipoise" and the "dreamlike aftermath." These two wisdoms help us free our minds of the limitations of stress and trauma, the straightjacket and the blinders that our stress and trauma put on us.

The spacious equipoise is freedom from the limiting sense of self, freedom from our neurotic way of being, that sense of breathing spacious possibility: "I can be anything, I can be anyone." Instead of my old mind used to thinking "I'm Joe, are people liking me or not? is this okay? what is going to happen next?" now I say "No, that's not me. My "I" is over here, and whatever it is I am open to it, I can see it, I can feel it." Then, afterwards, when my mind reboots and restarts, and it restarts generating forms -- because that's what minds do, they are partly form generators -- its fundamental nature is translucent clarity. It is a totally translucent and transparent information processor, it can process anything. That is the new "I."

Our mind can know that the universe is billions of years old, that it started with the Big Bang, and all that. Our bodies could never get there. But our mind can, it can get to know that. Because our mind is really infinite. The only thing that limits our mind is what we put it on. If we put our mind on something then it's limited; if we open it, it's infinite. That is the idea. That infinitely open mind is our new mind, our altruistic mind, our Bodhisattva mind, our omniscient mind. With that kind of mind we can understand anybody and anything. With that

kind of mind we are ready to deal with the world of interdependence and see things from many points of view; we are ready to get out of our narrow perspective and see the big picture, tell the forest from the trees.

And so the template for the new way of being is the dreamlike equipoise. In the dreamlike equipoise we appear to ourselves again as a person; only now we know that we are not *really* who we seem to be. We are actually spacious equipoise, and maybe the old sense of self is just a reflection on that spacious equipoise, that wave of awareness that is floating around. We know then that we can shape another way of being for our self, we can shape that dreamlike sense of self into a Buddha sense of self. The spacious equipoise is the wisdom that frees us and opens us and clears our minds of worries, traumas and limitations.

And the dreamlike aftermath? It relates to vivid imagery. When we get vivid imagery we have the equivalent of the dreamlike aftermath. When we get to the stage that we *know* that we are not only who we seem to be -- I am not only "Joe" and not White Tara either -- but that we are, in reality, ultimately, spacious openness, a little patch of awareness in the infinite interdependence of everything, that is our "divine pride" coming together, aligning with, "spacious equipoise."

That is how in this tantric system we carry forward the art of becoming an altruist. We do it at the same time as we imagine being White Tara. And then, I imagine Tara seeing my self, and I know that I am free from that old self, that I

am actually more than that. I can see that quality of Tara that I now have, my White Tara-ness if you will, which is transparency. As a result it becomes a self-dissolving self, a truly transparent self -- clearly a different way of being.

There are some other signs for moving forward. For example, when the new software starts to go viral in us, we start to experience our world in the light of that software. Traditionally it is said that what happens is we see all living beings and things as members of the mandala, and as the mandala itself. Everyone starts to appear to us as White Tara. We hear all sounds as her mantra and we register all movement as her movements, as her gestures of kindness and compassion. In short, if Tara seems to be everywhere, that is a clear sign of success, a sign that we're getting it.

The question is, how do we get to seeing all human beings as Tara? Slowly, slowly. Practice a lot of Tara meditation and it will happen. Just look at it this way. What is the real essence of Tara? The essence of Tara is unconditional love and compassion. It is radical unconditional love and compassion. I believe, I suspect this is somewhat true: every living being -- even my cat -- has a few ounces of unconditional love. It may not be very much, but it's there, it's present.

The point of seeing everybody as Tara is not to put yourself in la-la land, in some sort of trance or fantasy, and then you walk out into traffic. The point is that you are choosing to see their good side. You can see the faults of all the living beings around you; but you choose to interact with them, not based on



those faults, but on their greatest quality, and to value them for that quality. That is a human being. What is a human being? It's a being that has a very high potential for unconditional love and compassion.

Another way to see every being as a kind being is to think about that person's life, that person loves somebody, maybe they have children, they must love their children. And then you connect to that loving feeling. It's the same thing. You are just using your imagination to engage a thought process so that you can see everybody as loving and compassionate beings, just like Tara.

So this is how you engage with other people in a positive way.

And how do we engage with other people's negativities? As a parent or as a teacher of children you know that the best way to engage with negativity in your children is not to react to it, not to fear it or feel threatened by it, nor alienate it. Once you do that you are dead. The best way is to let it slide by, and to stay in your positivity, so that you overwhelm them with unshakable and unconditional positivity. Staying on the positive side doesn't mean that you have to be soft. You can be quite firm. The essence is nonviolence. Non-violence is non-cooperation with evil, I think Gandhi said that, I'm not sure. Gandhi spoke a lot about non-violence. You don't get angry with somebody for being negative, you are not fighting with their negativity, you don't engage with negativity, you are just not going to cooperate with it. You are not going to give it any reason or room to grow or attach itself to you, to contaminate you.

In order to have that kind of firmness one has to have fundamental security, one has to have unconditional security. Part of the reason why we do this is because we all have traumas, we all have existential evolutionary insecurity. We are born with it. We are wired for it and we have to undo that wiring. We know what we have to: dismantle all the tripwires and all the fail-safes, all the double and triple safety systems in us that are not *really* safety systems; they are more like self-destruct mechanisms. We know now that we don't need such strong safety and protection systems anymore, because we are not dealing with saber tooth tigers any longer. We are past that evolutionary stage. Now we are dealing with people. And, people, most likely are not going to eat you up, and you are not going to kill any of them. Unfortunately, we live in a culture that promotes violence in many ways, in a culture with too many memes charged with information that tell us that it's a good idea to kill people. So people do get confused.

As a human being you know that that's not the way to deal with others -- unless you are training to be a soldier; that's a whole other issue, one we could spend quite a while talking about, but not now. It is not natural for a human being to kill other human beings. Unless there's rage, and then it's natural.

In any case, we need to sort of embrace that person and their negativity with the closest thing to violence if you will, with aggression, with radical assertiveness from a place of good intentions. Peace, wellbeing, trust -- that is what non-violence is about. So you trust the power of love and compassion

because you know that the era of violence is over. Human history may be codified as a series of wars, but when we arrived at civilization the era of violence ended. Violence is essentially an archaic way of living, an anachronism, certainly in this era when we live more closely together as globalization advances. Violence seems to be our gig. But that is not where we are headed, it doesn't work well with violence. What do we do instead?

We assert our unconditional commitment to cultivate compassion -- what is called "fierce compassion." We will talk more about this, that is what's involved, and that is not easy.

When you visualize White Tara do you develop her qualities? The short answer is yes, to some extent, by working on our nervous system. The understanding of neurogenesis is that the art works because when our mind is focused on something beautiful and good, somehow, some of that rubs off on us. Something resonates in us, maybe it's because the parts that are really beautiful and good are responding, in some way.

We visualize White Tara to register her qualities in us, to wire up and build up those qualities out of what is now our potential. Learning works through registration and commitment. When we keep registering an image, or any mental content, overtime, if it lasts long enough, the image ends up etched into our wetware. Neuroplasticity works that way. At the biological level, we can change the regulation of gene expression in us. We start to call up different qualities of our potential, to build cells in a different way, so that we can tap into

different parts of our potential. What we are doing here is sort of re-sculpting our nervous system. We are rewiring ourselves for compassion.

There is a lot of interesting research on compassion going on currently. We have talked a bit about facial expression in mood research, and the importance of vocal tone and movement gestures, body language. Research is pointing out to the fact that all the qualities of a person, their way of moving, their way of speaking, their facial expression, they all register mood. In other words, our mood affects our nervous system and makes us behave in certain ways, and we express our mood in ways we are not always aware of. So for example when our mood is peaceful and friendly it calms us and it engages us socially.

The flip side to the fact that our mood affects our nervous system is that we can affect our mood through our nervous system, by using our nervous system in certain ways. For example, if we want to change our mood to a kinder, more open and generous mode, we imagine people around us as White Tara; and then get that kinder feeling, we feel kinder, more kindly disposed towards them, like White Tara would. If you think that this can help you to be kind in your social interactions, then you should envision others as Tara. When we envision our self as Tara the same thing happens. Because bringing in White Tara increases our level of relaxation, and our social engagement skills. In brief, imagining yourself as, sounding to yourself as, and moving as a caring being

reinforces those capacities within you and disposes your nervous system to support those capacities.

We humans are very flexible plastic creatures. And this art uses that quality. This art is like sculpting, we are sculpting our potential out of our nervous system, by using our imagination in all kinds of ways, using many sorts of practices. This art is very far out, it reaches very far out.

The White Tara practice can be used for protection from stress and for purification. Today we started with a guided meditation that is an abbreviated version of a stress protective imagery practice. To use it for purification you envision White Tara and her main five chakras, and an exclamation point at each chakra, each of a different color, like gems: a diamond at her crown, a ruby at her throat, a sapphire at her heart, a citrine at her navel and an emerald at her pelvis. They can represent many things, for example the five basic mind-body systems, the so-called "aggregates." They can be used to represent emotions. For example:

At the crown is delusion, the fixed false belief that you know who you are and what you are; the exclamation point is kind of white, not diamond white but a dull, dense, opaque white.

At the throat is clinging, obsessive desire; the color is red.

At the heart is anger, violent aggression; the color is a dense blue.

At the navel is greedy insatiability, and pride; the color is a dense yellow.

At the pelvis is competition, envy, jealousy; the color is green.

So you are in your breath bubble, in your breath-body of light, and you envision yourself as White Tara. She has already transformed you. You both have the same sorts of things. The exclamation points in your five key places are the same color; but in your case the colors are opaque, sadly. They are opaque because they are tainted. The opaqueness is a symbol of being tainted by the afflictive emotions. But this will change ...

The next thing Tara does is send her lights to you. Her lights come towards you one at a time. And, one at a time, they purify your five key centers. There is a gradual process to get through this. Ultimately, you will be able to purify your nervous system of the poisons of stress and trauma by accessing your nervous system and bringing Tara's influence into your nervous system. And then it becomes clear and luminous.

As she clears each chakra she fills your body with light. The light glows out of your body as an aura and sets up a force field that is the same color as the chakra being purified. You can move up or down your chakras, from the crown to the pelvis, or the other way around. Just keep it simple.

When you practice White Tara you first set up a diamond-white shell spreading out about 20 feet; or you can imagine this space as your shell space, diamond laser light, then ruby laser light at your throat, then sapphire laser light at your heart, citrine laser light and the navel and finally the emerald laser light at the pelvis. One by one, they purify each one of your centers.

Then Tara sends rainbow light to all your energy centers; on the outside you imagine the color of amethyst, or eggplant, which seals in all the goodness you have generated. Everybody likes the shells, the shells are cool.

In between each energy center there is a network of lotuses of the same color as the shell. Actually you are not going to see these, just think of them as a rainbow firewall, a firewall made of the full spectrum of color, protecting and zapping away intruders; nothing can get through ...

So here you are, with Tara inside, totally safe and protected. She has cleansed you and purified you. And with her power to protect inside you, you have been able to create a space of security. This is actually the way that trauma treatment works, in that you first create a sense of safety: "The war is over, I am safe, harm is not going to come to me, I am not going to come to harm here." You can purify the toxins within you because you feel safe enough. "I don't really need to be hyper today, I don't need to be so vigilant, I don't need my anger today, I am safe." Then you can get on with the purification, purify and let go of those toxins.

After you have created this protective environment, this stress-free environment, and you have purified your mind and body in this way, you can then go out and start purifying the world around you. You can now send out lights to people, lights with different colors depending on their needs, on what poisons are troubling them, anger, pride, clinging or addiction.

And so this is the practice, this is the way that you practice *mind-transforming* in this tantric system. You use visualization, you use lights and mantras and all kinds of fancy technologies to connect and identify with ideal images that will help you do your thinking, positive thinking. And you cultivate an instant capacity to establish a place of unconditional safety and security, so you can be ready for unconditional engagement, and respond constructively. This is a very powerful way to train yourself for a really heroic, proactive way of being. And that is why I love this practice.



## Chapter Eight

### The Neuropsychology of Self-World Imagery & Self-Transformation

In this part of our journey, we will be doing visualization practice, which is the standard Tibetan form of entry meditation. We're going to focus on the hero archetype of Sheer Brilliance, and we'll work with the part of our minds that is clear enough to free ourselves and see ourselves.

Starting again gives us the perfect excuse to do one thing that Tibetans love to do, which is to review. It's very helpful to review, because we need to keep hearing what's important over and over again in order to let it sink in, slowly, and to familiarize ourselves with it. And we need to contextualize where we are right now.

So, to contextualize, let me say a few things about the Nalanda Institute, and about this program. Nalanda Institute is named for the first residential university in history, in North India. It was a Buddhist monastic university, but it welcomed people who were not monastic, including non-Buddhists, to teach and study there. Nalanda is considered to be the alma mater of all the schools of Tibetan Buddhism. But that's not the only reason why we chose it as an icon for our little institution of contemplative learning. Nalanda also represents a specific lineage of the Indian Buddhist tradition that had two qualities that are really important to us.

One is that it was lay-oriented, focused on transforming people living in the world. Nalanda placed the whole Buddhist tradition, the Buddhist technology for liberation, into useable form for those of us who are living in the world, a world that is not like a monastery, a world that can be a pretty wacky, disturbing and upsetting place. The other important thing is that Nalanda emphasized the scientific version of the teachings, which I think is important for those of us who are trained and educated in this Western culture. This version translates across different cultures more easily than the more ritualistic or esthetic versions of the teachings you might get in a more traditional Tibetan meditation community. Here we're focusing specifically on the health psychology, and the very vibrant integration of Indo-Tibetan contemplative sciences and arts with modern psychology, neuroscience, psychotherapy and self healing, and all that is about what is happening.

We are now in the third year of our four-year program on sustainable happiness. And this is one of our two core programs. The other, starting in the Fall, is a certificate program for contemplative psychotherapy. This is a two-year training program that's more intense, for both professionals and lay people.

Both of our core programs do what the Tibetan tradition does best, which is to cover all of the bases of the evolution of Buddhist, and Indian, spiritual contemplative science and practice in one gradual format, one that provides everything you need to know. It covers the basics, the middle stuff, the advanced stuff. And it integrates theory and practice. So it provides a very

user-friendly package for people who have to have one-stop shopping. We don't have all day to get enlightened, so we have to try to get the theory together with the practice together with the application as much as possible, all under one format. And that's the gradual path format, the systematic curriculum of Nalanda University that is the basis for our four-year and two-year programs.

Nalanda teaches things in a systematic way, step by step. And where we are today is the middle of the third year. For those of you who are new to the program, have no fear, because you can enter anywhere, pretty much, more or less. You can go back to the beginning if you like, or just enjoy where you are right now.

To orient us in terms of where we are within the four-year program, let me say that each year has a major developmental challenge. The first challenge is to put the fire out: stop the unhealthy fire, the cycle of stress and trauma. This is a violent cycle which I sometimes call a hangover of evolution. It's a cycle triggered by our stress response, because wired into us, in our brains, our systems, there is a negative bias when we feel threatened. We get defensive. And when we get defensive our bodies and our minds get somewhat poisoned, they get loaded with stress, and we end up sort of living in that stress juice.

That's the first level of spiritual, contemplative practice within this very broad gradual path, what most people know as basic mindfulness, or basic hatha yoga. Both are practices to calm the mind, still the mind, stop the

violence, stop the noise, stop the chatter and get a space a clarity, a space of spaciousness. You may know the feeling, "I wasn't feeling very spacious at that moment." It's important for us to be aware when we're being pushed by this over-determined force of negativities, of fears, frustrations, confusion that we can feel in our bodies and our minds. It feels like being all tied up in knots. On the other side of the spectrum, when we get to feel safe and comfortable, then we can open our minds. So that's the first thing we need to do: stop that cycle of stress that's gotten us tied up in knots, then we can bring a degree of spaciousness and clarity -- of peace, presence, whatever you want to call it -- and then we can be more open to our minds.

That requires learning how to let go of what's hurting us, learning how to stop the cycle of stress, of violence, even though we're sort of addicted to it. We're all sort of stress junkies. As the Dalai Lama likes to say, we're all experts in anger. And we're experts in fear too, and shame and lots of other unpleasant things. But we also have this amazing brain that has the capacity to unlearn them, unlearn our bad habits, habits that lead to stress. That evolution began when we were mammals, 70 million years or so ago. A part of our brain developed a whole new and different capacity that is the basis for civilization, for living in community, in society. That is the capacity to have empathy for others, to cooperate with others, to manage our feelings in a way that keeps us open to understand others, get along with them, and not fear them. We can turn "them" into kin, into "us" . We can learn to care for them.

That's the second year's focus, on a second transition, now you're not just at peace with yourself, but you can take it on the road. You can actually bring peace into your interactions with others even when they are stressful and difficult. When we can do that, when we develop that second capacity, that is called "mind clearing" in this tradition. Some people call it "mind training," some people call it "compassion training." Whatever you call it, it's all about overcoming trauma. It goes beyond stopping stress, it's about stopping the insidious conditioning in our childhoods, what we have inherited, ancestrally, by getting the imprints of our parents' traumas. And that is the feeling of being all alone in the world, "nobody loves me, everybody hates me, let me go eat worms" kind of feeling, a feeling which is rooted in our childhood, a feeling of the traumatized self that sets us up for getting very stressed when we interact with others. We need to overcome that feeling. And that's when we can begin to get in touch with a kind of new self, away from those awkward feelings, more like what we sort of think of as heroic. That is the part of us that's actually able to take care of not just ourselves but also others -- and there's a heroism in that. This is what Rudyard Kipling is talking about when he writes, at the beginning of his poem "If":

"If you can keep your head when all about you  
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you ..."

In other words, "If you can be the calm person on a small boat," as Thich Nhat Hanh says, "that person does not have to do much." You stop your stress response by not reacting. You'll find that sometimes, when things get crazy, doing very little, or nothing, just staying calm and focused in the moment, actually creates a sense of peace. That's the ultimate, the original heroism. From a Buddhist point of view, heroism isn't about defeating outer enemies or challenges. It's about dealing with the enemy system in our own minds, the inner terrorist plot, the part of our mind that usually gets freaked out like a cornered animal and then it hijacks us, takes over us. To tame that part of our mind that freaks out we have to deal with the psychology of trauma that comes from childhood, when we feel threatened and alone, not like a heroic self but the opposite, a victim self, a victim of our traumas: "Somebody's hurt me, I'm helpless and powerless, I'm small."

In reality that's the way we all come into the world: very helpless and very small, very dependent on others. Even though we grow up and we survive, and we may become awesome and maybe intimidating to others, the reality is that we don't usually feel that way. This is because of the negativity bias in our minds that I've mentioned before. We continue to hold on to our sense of self as very small, helpless, and powerless. Overcoming that sense and learning to find that part of us that's large and expansive and connected, that's what we're learning about here. We can think of this in terms of the modern discovery of positive

affects. Barbara Fredrickson is a social psychologist who talks a lot about what she calls "positivity." We're sort of leaving the stress affect world, leaving all the fears and negativities and moving into positive affect. Positive affect is loaded with confidence, kindness, compassion, joy, courage. These are all expansive emotions, positive emotions that make our body feel ready to open up and face the world. Whereas the stress emotions make our body more uptight.

That's the beginning of developing a heroic self. In this context, the hero is just starting out. It is in seed mode, seminal mode. It's just a little hero, nascent, like planting a seed in our mind: "Somewhere I feel like I have the potential to be heroic ... but I'm not there yet." We can slowly nurture that feeling, and build on it.

From that point on there are two methods on the hero's journey. One, as we saw the first year, is stopping stress and trauma. That's Buddhist heroism under the tree: "I'll stop here, I'm not moving until I reach clarity about what is medicine for the human condition." And two, as we saw in the second year, is the heroism of reengaging in the world: "Now that I've found at least some glimpse of the peace and space within myself, how do I re-engage with the world in a way that I don't get all tied up in knots, tainted by it? We can develop the skills, very slowly -- as they like to say in this tradition, over "three incalculable eons." But that is a very long time. As a westerner I think of it as the pace of social evolution. If you study the evolution of societies, you will find out that they start out small and fragmented and maybe more violent, and over

time, if they are successful at survival, they become larger -- and larger societies and more cooperative, less violent. But that transformation takes a long time.

For example, take a look at some of the body language. I love the way Indians (from India) speak when they use their hands. Their hands move, their heads bob, gently. They didn't come out of the womb speaking like that, it's a trait that is cultivated over a long period of time. It probably took centuries to develop that level of embodied civility, that level of being expressive in a gentle way.

You can think of this slow evolutionary change in another way, in a simpler context: your parents are probably a little kinder and gentler than their parents. You're hopefully a little kinder and gentler than they were. Your kids are hopefully a little kinder and gentler than you. And so we eke out of violence, very slowly, a drop at a time. And so we progress socially, we become more civil. I think you can say that. It's a tough one though, it's not so simple, because along the way there are lots of twists and turns, like deviations and exceptions that prove the rule.

Now, what if we want the fast track? What if we don't want to wait three incalculable eons? We don't want to wait several life times, especially Americans -- and New Yorkers. We believe that we only have this one life, so why not move as fast as we can? Then we need the Tantric path, the path of alchemy, the fast track of transformation. That's what we do in the third year. And that's where we are now: on a fast track of transformation.



These three forms of Buddhist practice are identified clearly. The first level, during the first year, it is the Theravada practice, the Burmese and Sri Lankan practice of the saffron-robed monks who teach mindfulness and want peace. They are very quiet, lovely professional people.

The next level, the second year, is more connected with East Asia and people like Thich Nhat Hanh, who, in a way, put an emphasis on compassion and interconnectedness, on kindness in the world, compassion in the world, and on finding a spiritual path in the world. This is called Mahayana practice.

The third year is focused on a kind of Buddhism that is only fully evolved and fully present in Tibet, Nepal, Ladakh and Bhutan, although there are sprinklings of it in East Asia, and among Zen practitioners, some people say. You know, all that beautiful art from the Himalayas that you see at the Rubin Museum or in the shrine here in Tibet House is designed for meditation. And it's designed as part of a tradition that takes us beyond just trying to open and clear our mind and tap into a mood of radical peace and kindness and compassion for all living beings. Here you're actually trying to develop a new way of seeing yourself in the world, and that new way comes with a new software that speeds up the process. That is what we're talking about now. We use visualization in this kind of practice, because visualization speeds the process. As a Westerner, you can think about it as things, like our dreams, happening in images. Images, Jung believed, speak directly to the

unconscious. They speak, if you will, to the right brain, to the older part, the repressed part of our nervous system, sort of the early emotional system.

We also do affirmations -- you can call them mantras or prayers -- that speak to the sort of inner cat inside us, that cat that likes to purr. When the Tibetans are reciting mantras, it sounds like purring, like my cat, Ginger.

And then, in the fourth year we'll talk about energy work, about how you take things to the next level. This rapid transformation we are dealing with here involves gradually integrating all the layers of your nervous system and using special meditation tools that allow you to speak to the older parts of your nervous system and integrate them up to a level of clarity and openness that we can almost taste. You can call the process in the last two years of this program "the hero's journey" because trying to transform your mind and your life in a very dramatic and radical way, using very powerful tools, recreating and reconstructing your sense of self *is* a heroic enterprise.

Last semester we started to talk about changing your self-image. We will review what we talked about before moving forward, so don't feel like if you weren't here you missed it. In this tradition, if anything is really integral to the whole picture, you get it over and over again. Then, moving on, we'll talk about what you do when you start to change your self-image and you start to see a little bit of that hero or genius in yourself, somewhere: What do you do with that? How do you apply it to the way of life? That's the art that we're going to talk about here: the art of recreating life, of restructuring our perception of life.

In preparation to talk about that, I'm going to give you a bit of neuroscience background. I'll talk about the prefrontal cortex, about imagery and how that works, about how the self is constructed. And I'll show you the ways that neurological science resonates with this particular tradition of Buddhist meditation.

Before moving on I want to say a few words about the syllabus. My book is referenced, because it's the one I know best, and it has everything you need to know for the whole four-year program. What we're doing now is covered in Part Three of my book. If you want a kind of lighter version, then I recommend Lama Yeshe's *Introduction to Tantra, The Transformation of Desire*. Especially for those that are new to the Tibetan approach to enlightenment, you'll find in it a very fresh, simple and direct introduction. Tashi Tsering's book, *Tantra: The Foundations of Buddhist Thought* (Vol. 6) is more like mine, step-by-step, like a cookbook, practical, you can use them as manuals.

So, let us talk a bit about the neuropsychology of transformation, and about psychology and imagery, how all of that works. I was reading this book by Rick Hanson, a neuropsychologist from San Rafael, California, a really interesting book called *Buddha's Brain*. There are many books about the brain, neuroscience, and Buddhism, but I like this one best because it is written from the point of view of the practitioner. Because he's a neuro-psychologist, he writes as a practitioner. So he can give you more useful information.

One of the things Rick talks about is human evolution, and how our brain evolved. And so we evolved. Let's say about 300-500 million years ago we developed a stress response. Then we got a brain stem. And then, about 70 million years ago, we became mammals, we developed the first layer, the cover over the brain stem. Dan Siegel uses his hand as a built-in model of the brain. You can check it out on YouTube. It goes something like this: the spinal cord is represented in the wrist; the brain stem is the middle of the palm; the limbic system is the thumb, folded and touching the middle of the palm; and the other four fingers, folded over the thumb, covering it, are the cortex covering the limbic system. In the evolutionary context, the limbic system comes with the emotional brain, which is the old mammal brain, the brain that our cats have and mice have. Then, later on, about 5 million years ago, primates came along and developed another layer, a new covering, called the new cortex, or neocortex. In that new covering, there's a part that only humans have, all the way up front, right behind the third eye -- and that is the prefrontal cortex.

Everybody is excited about the prefrontal cortex nowadays. If you're interested in learning more about it, you can read a bit about it in Rick Hansen's work, and Dan Siegel's work. They will both be here, in the flesh, Rick in October and Dan in May. Dan is a psychiatrist who is interested in transformation, and in using mindfulness for transformation. He writes a lot about the prefrontal cortex and how it does all the things that Sister Mary would have liked me to do when I was a kid. And that is to be kind and compassionate, and patient, and loving ...

In short it's about The Ten Commandments, they're all up there. That part of our brain that has those qualities doesn't develop until we're 20. And in our 20s, for most of us, it doesn't get used that much unless we specifically live through caring. What I mean is that if we have to take care of our parents, or if we love animals, and others, if we're natural caregivers, that caring part of our brain develops more. Another way we can promote that development is through meditation. You can be a banker and still have a well developed prefrontal cortex, provided you're thinking about how to benefit all other living beings in your meditation time. And we need bankers, to balance our books on this planet, right?

The prefrontal cortex allows us to do a variety of things. For example, it allows us to regulate our emotional brain, our limbic brain. When we feel threatened the activity in the amygdala, which is part of the limbic system, rises to protect us. And it tends to do that a little bit too much, it exaggerates the threats. The prefrontal cortex, on the other hand, allows us to get it to calm down.

So the prefrontal cortex regulates our emotions. It works like an orchestra director: it can say, "less stress here, please" and "a bit more love and compassion there." It can do these things -- and a lot more. We're learning now about neuroplasticity, that quality that the brain has to keep on changing with our experience. In fact, when we pay attention to something our neurons fire to support that mind state; as they say, "when the neurons fire together they wire

together" they open new pathways in our brain. So what we are doing here is we are networking, we are building a new network that can support out new way of being. Unfortunately that means that if we're constantly reliving stress and trauma, we're constantly rewiring trauma. In fact, for those of us in that situation, our brain starts to erode, a little bit, because the stress hormones have no place to go. It's just like being overly active. On the other hand, when we calm our minds and start generating some oxytocin and other kinds of more positive chemistry, our brains grow. They become plastic, more flexible, they grow, they run. And so meditators have thicker brains. The stress part of their brain, the amygdala, shrinks; and the prefrontal cortex, the newer part of the brain, grows. That's good news, that tells you something important: we have that potential to change our brains.

The prefrontal cortex has different areas that do many interesting things. For example, there's the medial prefrontal cortex, whose main job it is to tell our story to ourselves over and over again, reinforcing some sense of identity. Dan Siegel talks about this in terms of maps. He says the essence of the story is that we have a "me-map" and a "you-map" and a "we-map." We have images of everything: images of who we are, of who others are -- "important" others, "fearful" others and so on -- of what the world is. Who's the "we" and what's the "we"? The way this system operates is by taking little bits of data it perceives in the world and then matching them with impressions filed in our memory banks – visual memory, auditory memory, amygdala emotional memory, hippocampus

emotional memory. And so most of what we perceive is actually not what's really happening out there right now. What we perceive is made mostly of recycled stuff, from the archives, the data banks in our memory. Little bits of data are fed in and spliced with some memories. And, unfortunately because our human brains have a negativity bias to be over-protective, I'm going to look out for the worst. That is the way of our brains.

Rick Hanson says that our brains are like Velcro for suffering and like Teflon for happiness. Suffering sticks to our brains, and happiness seems to just slide off, we forget about it. Those of you who have heard my gamblers story, you know that there's a fair and increasing amount of evidence that we humans weigh negative experiences many orders of magnitude more -- hundreds of time more -- than positive experiences. Our job here is to reverse that tendency.

As you can expect, if you're using your worst-case scenario thinking mode, all sorts of nightmares appear: nightmares from childhood, evolutionary nightmares, ancestral nightmares ... and they start to feel more real. If you heard stories of traumas as you were growing up, or maybe you just intuited them from your parents somehow when something bad happened, something about it sticks to your mind. You get this negativity going in there, and so now you are producing a horror movie, and your life becomes that horror movie. You are producing this negative sequence in your median prefrontal cortex, the part of our brain that orients us. This is why we can't stop thinking about ourselves, because there's a part in our brain that is constantly reinstalling the

gyroscope and sending messages of who we are. "You are Joe. You live in New York. These are your parents. This is what your job is now. This is what you're supposed to be doing ..." And we think, why would this be necessary because I'm me, why do I have to constantly be me?...

Have you ever had this experience of not knowing who you are? A few times in my life, usually after jet lag, I've woken up from a deep sleep and I didn't remember who I was or where I was or what it was all about, what it was to be a person. And I was definitely aware. It was kind of scary, almost like panicking but not too bad. But that's what it is. Actually inside of our mind there is that part that is clear of our identity that shows up when we go to sleep. It doesn't know who we are. It doesn't really care who we are. It just wants to bliss out, be clear and open, float in space. Right? That's the reason why we have the heavens in our cosmology, because we have them inside of us. But we don't live there. Instead we build on top of them, we build these little prison palaces, these golden cages. And we live in them without noticing how they are limiting us. Sociologists talk about this as reification, a term with Latin roots that means making something out of nothing. So it means you are making something out of nothing. How? At some point in life, in early childhood, you have an experience -- it can be any experience -- and then you say, "that's not just an experience, that's "me". You identify yourself with that experience, it becomes you. And then you build that identity up. How does this happen, specifically? You build up a sense of self, and then you forget you built that, and it becomes you. It's



the self that we're constantly recreating in our mind, what the Tantric traditions call the *ordinary self*.

All Buddhist traditions believe in the 12-link cycle of dependent origination that Buddha taught lead to suffering. So how does our suffering happen, how is it produced? Like one domino falling and pushing the next one, beginning with our instinct for reification, the self-habit, the instinct to think that we are something fixed and distinct from everything else, and to cling to that entity that we think we are. I call it self-reification. Most people call it ignorance. We could also call it delusion, which is more appropriate. Delusion is a good translation, but still not so clear. We humans come into the world with this capacity for delusion, to make a self up, then we forget that we made it up and delude ourselves into thinking that that's who we really are.

We have negative emotions because we want to survive. At some point survival meant we had to run from saber-toothed tigers, for dear life. Those negative emotions got us moving out of there, fast. Out of those two experiences we developed what we call an "alienated self-consciousness:" we become aware of the separate self. It feels like, "Gee, I'm not very happy when mommy goes into the bathroom, I get really panicky and I feel like I'm going to die ... where's mommy?" And then we start to develop what's called a "name and form," a "*Nāmarūpa*" in Sanskrit, a self construct, an image of myself, a self-image or body image, connected with a name. That's the self, a name together with an image. From then on, from our point of view, we develop a skewed

perception of the world because we're looking at it from this odd angle, this self we've made, this false reference point, this cursor of our lives. And so we look at the whole world from that funny angle, usually one that is loaded with fear, or alienation, or resentment. From that angle the world feels unpleasant, our contact with the world feels unpleasant and stressful. So we start to have cravings, for happiness, or at least for something to relieve us from the unpleasantness and stress. And so we develop a compulsive life. That compulsive life wears us down and makes us sick. This is the Buddhist explanation of the origin of our suffering.

Some parts of this theory of the origin of suffering have been confirmed by modern neuroscience. Now, how does our self construct actually start? It doesn't start alone, on its own. When we catapult into this world from wherever we come from, in the Buddhist cosmology, as in Freud and in modern developmental theory, we are drawn into the world, into our development, attached to our parents. We're attached to loving one of them and wanting closeness; and we're attached to identifying with the other and wanting to become that other person, or take the place of the other person according to Freud. Actually, before children develop self-constancy, they develop object constancy, like a consistent mental image of mother. Why does a child develop a consistent mental image of the mother? Because if, as a child, I don't have an image of mother, then, when she leaves the room I'm convinced she's dead, and I panic. But if I develop a mental image of her, at least I've got a mental

image to hold on to when she's out of my sight. So I can remember what mother looks like. It's not like having mother, but it is something like having mother. It reminds me that she's going to come back.

Once we have a mental image of mother, in the mirror of that image we start to develop an image of ourselves, something like, "Mother smiles at me when I smile, mother frowns at me when I cry ... it must be good to smile and bad to cry."

We create this image of a self out of something we've already created, which is our image of our mother. And that becomes our prison. We get locked in that self and that world. We have to spend hours on the analytic couch and who knows if that actually helps us to get out of it, or if it just gets us further in, deeper into trouble. If it's helpful analysis, it helps us break out of this prison. The mind does have this power. In the old days, when I was in medical school nobody talked about the mind. Nobody defined the mind or mentioned that anyone had a mind or said anything about mind. That included psychiatrists. In medical school it was all about the body. I didn't see a single picture of a whole person during the first two years of medical school. There was no person, no individual, no mind, just little bits of anatomy, of neural pathways. That can be a useful analysis, I guess, for some purposes. But it wasn't what I was looking for. Anyhow, the point is that we develop this image of a self by developing a sense of our interaction with another. And out of that we develop this whole new way of being. And the mind has the power -- as modern neuroscience is discovering

about vivid mental imagery. The thing about imagery is that if you imagine an apple vividly, the signature it leaves on the brain is just like the signature of the real thing. That's what studies done with the EEG showed. So, your brain is like a simulator. There is something about neural activity that registers the same when you're imagining an apple as when you're eating it. That may be the reason why, if you imagine a flame on the tip of your finger, your blood flow to the tip of that finger increases, and its temperature increases. Yet you're just imagining the flame.

There is one study that is very relevant here and that I have mentioned before in the context of using imagery in your practice, by Robert Kunzendorf at the University of Massachusetts. where subjects were exposed to the colors green and red. The results showed that if the participants were vividly imagining the color green when their eyes were exposed to the color red, they actually did not see red, they saw green. And not only did they *not* see red, their retina registered green. So your retina is being driven by your visual cortex. Your visual cortex is telling your retina what it sees. And in this case while the retina was exposed to the color red but the subject was imagining the color green, the retina picked up the message from the mind. This isn't a physical process, it's a mental process, but it has physiological effects. So imagery is powerful.

Going back to our life movie, the movie that we are creating in our minds, if we're making a horror movie, everyday, so many times a day, episodes in which we are small and helpless and powerless, and the world is threatening

and unknown and strange and potentially evil, we're basically scaring the living daylights out of ourselves, constantly. We're living in constant struggle for survival, even though that struggle is already over and we humans won. Now we're at the top of the food chain, and we're killing off all sorts of species. But we're still thinking we're in danger, because we're so small. And we're killing life on the planet. So, why do we still think like this, that we're under such threats? Again, that is because of our conservative conditioning, we attach ourselves to worst-case scenarios, and in particular to feeling threatened and perceiving ourselves as helpless. And how do we undo that? Using imagery, and specifically the imagery that has the power to speak to our nervous system, and our unconscious minds, and our emotional minds. Because, remember, our capacity to form mental images is much older than our ability to speak. Mental images go way back in human evolution. That's why Jung used them in his psychotherapy. And that's why Freud used dream images in his. Images tap into our so-called implicit memory, a memory that goes deep into the unconscious. So we use images. But not just any image. We use images of self and other. Why? Because at the center of my mental constructions, the mother of all mental constructions is that of me and my world. My concept of myself is the ultimate default, the ultimate reference point of what my world is, and what "me" is.

There's a lovely passage in *Great Exposition* by Tsong Khapa, the founder of the Dalai Lama's school of Tibetan Buddhism, where he says that the part of

the mind that is conditioned existence, or survival-based existence, is generated by "an inner monologue having the form of 'I' and 'mine' and subject and object ... the inner monologue is the chief cause of suffering which has the nature of existence." That monologue is referred to as way of existing because it anchors our construction of self and reality, the "I" and "mine" -- the "who am I?" and "what am I?" and "what's my reality?"

There are a couple of challenges here. One is to realize that our self-image, that is how we see ourselves, is important. The other is to understand that our narrative, that is who we say we are, what images we identify with, how we move pieces of the images, and how we make a story out of them, is like film making: we've got some images, we've got a splicer, we break them and put them together again, we reorganize them and we have a story line. We can even add a little mood music, and then we've got a movie!

What if we don't want to be run by the movie that is the default program in our nervous system? What if it is like that horror movie that we talked about earlier, driven by stress? Then we have to make a new movie. And, to spare us all the work and trouble of becoming film producers, this tradition provides a very structured system that opens access to the essence of what we need to reinvent our lives. The first element is to recreate our sense of self. In the meditation that I led you through earlier today, which is the meditation of Shear Brilliance, or *Manjushri* in Sanskrit, after we purge our ordinary memory banks (which we need to do in order to start fresh), we imagine an ideal being in front

of us. That ideal being will be our new mother, our new reference mother. And in the mirror of this new mother we recreate a new self. (1:08:41) We learn as we embody the ideals of this mirror image of a self. And, eventually, we take on the whole reference self, the new mother self, we absorb this mother self whole, into ourselves. And that's when we become fully integrated as this new self, at least at some mentally simulated, imagined level. That's self-creation, that's what we focused on last semester. And that is tantra's creation stage.

This semester we take the next step. Once I have a new self-image, or at least a glimpse of my potential to have a more empowering self-image, how do I transform my film, my narrative, my story of myself and the world? We start by taking on the world and realizing that our story is not a fact. It may be true that I was born in Rockville Center in 1955, but how I perceive that, what meaning that little bit of historical fact has in my personal story, that is added on, an interpretation of a fact, for example making that fact very relevant, or not. There are an infinite number of ways that I could interpret each little bit of biographical data. It's what I choose to emphasize, and the where and the how, that determine my story.

What is a life story? In this tradition the thinking is big, and people think in very broad strokes. And their answer is: you were born, you developed, and then you died. Those are the basic elements, right? Recall the three nodes? In this class, we'll look at these three nodes, we'll look into how to transform them: How do you transform your sense of your birth, your origin? How do you

transform your sense of your development? And how do you transform your sense of your death? How do you use them in a path where you don't wind up stuck in the same story all the time, over and over again, looking in the mirror and saying "It's me, here I am again, oh no! ... " Now you are actually able to recognize the pattern, pick it apart and see it dissolving, see it dissolve. And out of that comes a new person, a person you recognize, a person you've made with the help of your friends, and the larger community, and your practices and techniques.

I'm going to read you two quotes from Tsong Khapa:

Regarding the purification of our ordinary perception of the life cycle, a person who has previously collected the evolutionary action (or karma) that is the cause of taking birth in the womb dies.

In the Tibetan view, because of the belief in multiple lives, the life cycle starts with death: First we die, then we develop, and then we're reborn. We can take that as a clue to how we have to recreate ourselves: First, I think I'm Joe; if I want to be somebody else, I need to first die as Joe. I need to discover that Joe is just a fiction. And so I'm going to say, creatively, like taking the same scene in the movies again, "Joe Take 2" or a software program, Joe 2.0. Out of the death of Joe 1.0 I'm free to become a new being, out of being Joe 1.0 I develop into something new.



Again, quoting Tsong Khapa on the *creation stage*:

A person ... taking birth on the womb dies and attains the between state; then the between-state being enters the womb of the mother and, having remained there, finally gets born outside; then having taken a wife he performs the deeds of having sons and daughters, having taken all those ordinary life-cycle things as the objects of correspondence, it is in correspondence with those that one meditates in the *creation stage*.

Here Tsong Khapa is essentially giving us the structure for how to recreate ourselves, but with death at the start of the cycle: first a being dies; then he/she enters the womb and remains there; then it is born outside; then it takes a partner and performs the deeds of having children. Taking all of those ordinary life-cycle things as the objects of meditation, one meditates on them in the *creation stage*.

Tsong Khapa says that, just as our ordinary life story has nodes, or pieces, so does our new life story. Now we're going to talk about how we construct those pieces using imagery. We won't talk so much about the imagery per se, but how that imagery gets tacked down into our nervous system -- and there comes the act of reification. That is to say, once we create a new mental image, or string of images that we think is "me" we identify with it, we call it "me."

Once we call it me it becomes me, because there's no other criterion for being me, at least at this experiential level.

In this context, when we're talking about samsara, we're talking about the world of suffering, the world we want to transform, and the inner monologue that is the chief cause of suffering which has the nature of existence. The main reason why Woody Allen is still neurotic is because he's able to produce movies that we can all see, but not movies in his own mind. We need to learn how to make the movie in our own mind, and then reproduce it, and when we can do that we will be able to transform our ordinary life – the life of just surviving, just existing – into a truly meaningful and heroic life of growing, transcending, and giving back. And that's something really worth going for.

As you practice you will find that it's not easy to let your ordinary self die. Maybe there will be moments of transcendence and freedom, moments when you will feel like "Wow, I could be so different ...". But soon you find that the old self is back, there's the return of the repressed, the persistence of resistance. This tradition talks about that. That ordinary self is a stubborn thing. It's not so easy to get rid of.

So the next question is, how do we tolerate this dislocation? How do we go through those moments of what we might call "cognitive dissonance," when we realize that we're not where we should be, we're not who we could be, not yet? How do we tolerate that? The answer is by training in the preliminaries.

We have to prepare ourselves, we have to train to become good visualizers. Visualization practice is like a flight simulator. An astronaut trains to fly in a flight simulator. The simulator is just a bunch of computers. But as we train with one, as we go through the movements, the synapses in our brain are rewiring in the way that will eventually allow us to respond effectively when we find ourselves flying the real thing. In the same way, the imagery in our practice is priming our mind to be able to tolerate those moments of dislocation or spaciousness. Part of it has to do with the experiential process: by being exposed to dislocation and space we learn to make friends with them, we learn to be more open and to let go. Also, like any practice or training, it's about building the muscles that we need to do that. These are the muscles that are put to work in the preliminaries for this practice. We talked about them earlier. There are three of them: One, learning how to let go. Buddhists call it renunciation, and it means we have to know how to let go of suffering. Two, empathy and compassion, or learning how to stay connected in a good way. One of the ways we feel safe and secure enough to do this is that we have a mentor, a role model, or other people that we're doing the practice with, and in relation to. And three, there is emptiness, the wisdom of emptiness, which I often call openness, or radical open-mindedness. We'll talk about all this more later. But for practical purposes I want to tell you now what that really means -- and that is, learning how to tolerate the fact that the things that our minds make into realities aren't as real as they seem.

There are two ways of tolerating that. One is to see the things that our mind makes up, that our mind presents to us, as sort of dreams, or reflections. So for example you can look at your old self and see, "gee, that self is not as real as it seems; I feel like Joe but I know I'm not really *that* Joe, something is different now, more open ..."

The other way is to be able to experience openness in a form of spaciousness, where there doesn't seem to be any Joe and there doesn't seem to be any non-Joe either. There just seems to be this space, "hey, here I am, in this space ... If I could wake up from that deep sleep I've been in all this time but not panic ..." What would it take? For one, just call that space "me." If you start owning the spaciousness within you, and you say "this is me too, I am this spaciousness, this expansive, open, plastic, fluid spaciousness" pretty soon you'll find that you can live with that self just as you can live with another self.

So as you see here, there are various tricks that the mind can play for you, many ways that the mind can create a sense of security. And the big trick among all is to have a positive self-image that we get attached to, that connects us to our teacher, just like the connection to our mother, who is our lifeline. I call it this new template the "prosthetic self." Bob Thurman calls it a space suit; because if you're going to do things in space you have to have a space suit. In any case, it's like a transitional object, or a velveteen rabbit, like the one in the children's story that many of us heard from our parents, a toy velveteen rabbit that gets so much love it becomes alive. It is a self we can hold

on to. I call it the prosthetic self, because it is the self that we're using as a place holder while we're developing a new self. So you can think, "I am Shear Brilliance!" And you know that Shear Brilliance has a body. You may not be visualizing it right now. But you know that he has a body, you need to know that so you don't panic about losing your body, so you feel confident that when you wake up you'll be able to walk and talk.

So that's kind of how you build a new self-image. It seems kind of archaic, very Tibetan, very religious or very cultural. In any case, it has a profound psychological purpose. And that is: you have to have something, somewhere to feel safe, to call home. Without a home, like without a body, we start to get a little panicky. So let us choose the right home this time. As they say, "A body made of mind, fully formed in all its parts."

Some of you have asked me how to practice when you go home, as part of this class. It's up to you. There's a menu of practices you can choose from. In the Tibetan tradition there are two starter practices. You can start with mindfulness like everybody else does. Or you can start with visualization. In this system visualization is like a super highway on a ramp. You can quickly get on to the highway; you don't have to check all the local stops.

An easy way to get your practice going is go online to our website, [nalandascience.org](http://nalandascience.org), and at the bottom of the home page you will find a series of audio-guided meditations. If you want a visualization practice you can go to the mind wheel section. There are mind imagery practices, about a dozen of

them. There's a long and a short Medicine Buddha, a long and a short White Tara, a Healing Mother, a Manjushri Shear Brilliance Practice, and so on. If you prefer to read, we have posted a few scripts. And if you want to do basic mindfulness, you can listen to a basic mindfulness tape; there are many.

You can separate the theory and practice. You can do mindfulness practice or yoga practice or shamata practice or Transcendental Meditation (TM) practice, and still come to this class and learn about how you do this particular technique. You don't have to practice it if you don't want to. But if you do, then go home and try it, experiment with it, once a week, or twice a week, whatever. And you can do that using the scripts and the audio meditations on the Nalanda website. So just try it, see if you like it, see if something interesting comes up, and bring it back and talk about it. The traditional approach is that people just ease their way into practices, and you learn as you go.

This practice can feel weird because it's a structured imagery practice that we're not used to. It's really an art. So we need to use imagination. But we think that our imagination has been turned off. Actually it has not been turned off; it's that we're busy imagining this one story that we think is the only reality. But it is actually just a collective fantasy, a consensual fantasy, an interactive fantasy system. Meanwhile, our imaginations are still quite intact. Don't worry about whether your imagery is vivid or clear. You know, in a story, any story, you may not see every single image that is part of the story but you still get a sense

of the whole thing, your disbelief is suspended as Coleridge might have said, and you get a good sense of what is happening in the story. So, in the same way, in your practice, if you just have a sense, "Oh, I'm seeing this Shear Brilliance, I'm sort of seeing him ..." that's a good thing. I was just reading *The Lord of the Rings*. So Gandalf is talking to Frodo. I may not have a clear mental image of them, but I have a sense that it's all there, happening. And that's enough to work with. It doesn't have to be a crisp, vivid image. The crisp vivid imagery comes later. In this practice you go over it again and again. And, eventually, it will seem as clear as you or me.

I want to say a little bit more about integration and transformation. We have discovered in recent years the enormous power of facial imagery, and we now understand it a lot better. One question people often ask is, why imagine an archetype, a deity, a genius, or a hero archetype as Joseph Campbell would say? The answer is, not for the sake of the hero, not for the sake of the culture that generated that image, but because our minds are very sensitive to others, because our environment is other people, our natural habitat is other people. We humans have evolved to survive by forming empathic bonds with other people, bonds of kinship with other people.

We've done some studies of the mirror neurons in our prefrontal cortex -- we also have some in the back somewhere -- and they show that these neurons are constantly trying to read the facial expressions of others around us. So, if you're imagining a facial expression, one that's vivid and beautiful, you're

actually seeding the part of your mind that needs to be reassured that things are OK and that you have friends in the world, it's calm so you can calm down. And actually, when you are listening to a mantra you have that same calming effect, because the same nerves that calm the mind through reading facial expressions are located, in the brain stem, right alongside the auditory nerve that's hearing the sounds, they are connected – and so the sound of a voice can be reassuring to us. Movements, gentle loving movements like a mother makes when dealing with a baby, also have a calming effect; and so on. All of these things have an influence on our minds. They make us feel safe, they make us feel connected. That's why we imagine them. It may seem artificial; it is artificial. It still can work in very positive ways.

Envisioning an archetype and then using it as a mirror to transform yourself is an extraordinary preliminary of the *creation stage*. It's recognized as an artificial practice in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The tradition doesn't say "this is a real deity." It is a mental construction, a mental construction with a purpose: to serve as a template for us to redevelop a new sense of self.

After the *creation stage* comes the *perfection stage*. At that stage all of these images and sounds and gestures are connected to the central nervous system, which is pretty much the same thing that happens in the yoga tradition with the chakras. That is why I asked you to read a little bit about the neuroscience aspect of this practice. There are a few chapters in *Sustainable Happiness* that describe it. Compared to our Western map of the brain it looks



quite different, because we're mapping mostly the cell bodies of the neurons. If you map the other side of the cell, namely the axon, following the action play, or the sensory play, all the way from the discharge side to where the axon is connecting to another neuron, the axon is the part that is actually connecting, touching either another neuron, or a muscle, or something else. To go from a cell in the brain to a cell in the foot you go through the whole spinal cord and you actually reach all the way down. Between up here in my brain and down there in my foot there are only a handful of cells, I think two or three, two or three neurons, that's all. One goes from the motor cortex in the brain to some place down in the sacral spinal cord, and another goes through, all the way down. There might be a a third neuron going to another nerve, a sensory nerve or something like that. In any case, two or three neurons, that's not very much distance in biological terms.

Looking at our neurological map and the yoga chakra map together, our prefrontal cortex is the third eye chakra. Our neocortex is the crown chakra, the thousand-petal lotus, the big mother lotus, it is the place of the unfolding of consciousness and neural support infrastructure. Then, going down the body, the third chakra is the limbic system, which deals with emotions and things like that. The fourth chakra, or heart chakra, corresponds to somewhere in the hypothalamus, to something we call the core brain. And then as you continue down the body you get to the navel and the pelvis, which are brain stem centers.

The chakra map shows us how the yoga tradition was aware of the power of the mind to transform and integrate the nervous system. And it was aware of the power of the mind to untie the knots that block the bliss energies that flow within us, energies of openness and plasticity. When we untie these knots we can have access to these energies, energies loaded with the openness and the positivity that we need to build the kind of self that can heroically transcend our current limits -- our fears, our instincts, our karma ... -- and embrace the world in a welcoming way.

Some of this material is presented in the introductory pages of Chapter 7 of *Sustainable Happiness*. You'll notice that the text is pretty dense. I have to apologize for that, it may take some time to go through it. You can just look at the pictures, at the map of the chakras, and you can maybe read the caption. That already gives you an idea of what we're talking about. Then, what we're really working on here is what I read to you at the start of this class, which is in Chapter 8, on the art of reconstructing life.

As you practice and get involved in transformation you must trade one habit for another. There's no lightening path. The Buddha himself took six years to become enlightened, and he was doing it full time. Other masters take 10 years. The tradition says that if you do this practice you'll reach enlightenment in one to sixteen lifetimes. So, it's not so rapid by our standards. The fact is that having the imagination that we're suddenly transforming is not going to

suddenly transform us. It's a simulation. It's helping to get us accustomed to what it would be like to be different. We're so accustomed to being us. This is giving us another reference point: So, if you weren't you, you could be this, and here's what it might feel like. You may at some point wish that you could suddenly become that, but you're not going suddenly to become that. Especially since when you create this alter ego, this prosthetic self, you need to build into it the recognition that it's empty. It's just a transparent mental construction, and you remember that, because you don't want to build another prison that's just prettier than the last prison. You really want to free yourself. The purpose of the journey to the moon is not to wear a space suit; it's to really see the universe from a new point of view, perhaps, or something like that. So, really, there is no sudden way. Sometimes you can have experiences that rock your mind a bit, because going through some of these transitions is a little tricky. Just take them as stretches for your mind, an experience like a little Buddha story that I'm telling myself, I'm stretching my sense of self and, gradually, I see it expand my sense of range and capacity. And so, gradually, you find that you're able to let go of your attachment to your ordinary sense of self, a little bit at a time. You're able to feel a little bit lighter and a little bit clearer. And you don't know why. You're able to see that the old sense of self is more transparent than you thought and slowly sort of walk out of it, shed it like some creatures shed their skin, but in a very gradual way. Creatures shed their skins suddenly, so I guess that metaphor doesn't work so well here.

Part of the reason why tantra is a faster system for transformation is, not only because its technology is so very powerful, but also because it's an intuitive learning system. You're learning by modeling others, so you're not using your cognitive brain as much as you normally might. My first practice was in fact a tantric practice. It was actually the fierce form of Manjushri. At first I was completely overwhelmed, it was hard for me to really relate to it at all. It took me some time to feel like, "Oh, I've got a handle on this." And then it became more and more real to me, over time. The main point here is that these are practices for the long term. I've been doing that practice in one form or another for 30 or 40 years, a long time. You get to a point and the practice continues teaching you. It's not like something you can read in a book. The teaching is in the practice, in its beauty, in its intuitive implications, its pregnant symbolism. It has its ways of working on you. This tradition speaks to the intuition. It's an intuitive and multitasking learning system. It's not just up here, in the brain, analytical. There are some people like one of our faculty members, a great psychoanalyst and a professor at Columbia University. She told me that when she read some of the philosophical explanations in *Sustainable Happiness*, she thought, "Oh, I've been doing this practice for 20 years now, and I didn't understand half of what I was doing until I read your book." What I mean is, it's interesting to understand all of this, but I'm not sure how necessary it is for it to work. The practice seems to be effective, to work anyway.

## Chapter Nine

### Transforming Our Familiar Story Into A Heroic Journey & Life

For those of you who are new to this practice, I suggest that you try the visualizations posted on the Nalanda website as a liberal arts experiment. You can try the *Sheer Brilliance* guided audio meditation that is on the website, or the script, which some people find easier. There is also a short *Healing Mentor* and a short *Healing Mother*, if you want to get a flavor for this uniquely Tibetan style of meditation and the power it has to change our perception of reality, and that includes our perception of ourselves. So that's where we are.

Let's have a little review, let's go back a little bit. What is this tradition, this Tibetan Buddhist tantric tradition all about? We are within the larger, gradual path in the Nalanda tradition; and this is an alternate route. Most Buddhist traditions everywhere start with *mindfulness* practice. This tradition has another path of entry for meditation, and that is imagery.

In Part One, we started talking about using imagery to transform our self-image, our perception of ourselves. This style of meditation involves using your imagination. It gives you another way to focus your mind. And it doesn't matter how good you are at imagining things, how good your imagination is. The advantage of using imagery to focus your mind is that you are not just focusing on empty space or whatever is your object of meditation. Here you are training

your attention by feeding your mind information in the form of images, a mood, a tone ... it's like you are showing yourself your own life as a movie.

When you are using imagery you are not just learning on a level of awareness, you are also learning on the intuitive level of emotion or motivation, because a beautiful image can be inspiring or uplifting. Also, images have a symbolic meaning; they are evocative and they are affirmative, which is on a more poetic level.

This type of practice uses a sort of multi-tasking form of meditation focus. And that is partly why it is said to speed up the learning process. It is also more consistent with the way we learn from infancy, in the sense that as human beings we learn by watching other human beings, and by resonating with them, by using them as models. And so what we are doing here is, essentially, we are recreating that learning process for re-parenting ourselves -- like a therapist would do, but in this case it's a new parent. We are using that new parent as a model, a mirror to re-envision and recreate ourselves. It's a very powerful practice.

In Part Two, we are talking about how you change your image of yourself and then how you change what lies around that image, namely the story of your life and the landscape around it. I mean in the sense that, "I am who I am because I was born *there*, and because people call me *this*, and because *that* is what I do and *this* is how I live, *this* is how people think of me and *this* is where I

am going to die." We have that kind of hard sense of who we are, and all of it is in our minds.

I have talked a little bit about the medial prefrontal cortex, that part of the human brain that is constantly running our life film, over and over again. This life film is what we get to review when we are in a near-death experience. But actually it is always there. We are always sort of running that movie, on a loop, running it and adding to it, drawing mostly on information from our hippocampus and other places in the data banks in our brain, with, maybe, just a little bit of input from current external events, just to sort of keep it reality-like. But the life we perceive as real is basically a dream, an interactive dream that we are having with ourselves and with others. And sometimes it's not such a great dream. So how do we change it?

That's our journey now, the journey to get out of that movie, that confining movie that was handed down to us. Or maybe we developed it ourselves, without consciousness. We developed it as we were reacting to the world around, as best we could in the moment, without much thought, sort of by default. But now we are going to develop a movie consciously. That movie is a prerequisite for this kind of practice.

How do we develop the movie, the right movie? One thing that is useful is fearlessness. To give you a flavor for how this tradition teaches, let us go back to Manjushri in the guided meditation at the beginning of this class, the *Sheer Brilliance* meditation. Under Manjushri we had a snow lion. That snow lion, like all

the lions, is a symbol of fearlessness. So at a more subtle level that snow lion was there suggesting that the Sheer Brilliance teaching requires a level of fearlessness.

And how do we get to fearlessness? Some of the imagery that we go through in the guided meditations could be useful. In one, Manjushri is sitting on a lotus throne, a sun disc and a moon disc. These three images can be interpreted as visual representations of the three prerequisites of this kind of practice: renunciation, compassion and emptiness. Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Yellow Hat School of Tibetan Buddhism, gave a lovely and very powerful little teaching about this type of practice, only a few pages long, called "*The Three Principal Aspects Of The Path.*"

*Renunciation* is represented by the lotus, which rises out of the mud in which it is born. And so like the lotus we are born in mud -- we have afflictions, we have a nervous system with appetites, impulses and stresses, and we have a childhood loaded with confusion and traumas. How do we rise above all that, like the lotus, which rises beyond all? We do it by learning to let go of what is not working for us. And if we need a little help with that we can get it from our friends, or we go to therapy, that's fine. In any case, what we need is to let go of what is holding our development back, to rise above that inner drama of confusion and stress, hurt and anger, clinging, and all the other negative emotions that make up the poisonous mix out of which our nightmares arise.



*Compassion* is the next prerequisite of the path, and it is represented by the moon disc. Compassion is one of the two legs on which our new way of being is going to stand. Once we have some measure of renunciation and we start letting go of our crazy inner dramas, we start having compassion, for ourselves and for others, because now we understand suffering, and why we are all suffering. We understand, and we care.

We need the compassion -- and this tradition is very explicit about this -- in order to form a healthy bond with our mentors, and not be traumatized or get into an inner power struggle with them. We need a qualified mentor, somebody who has something to teach us, and who has the willingness and the genuine compassion to teach. We also have to have the capacity to understand, empathize and work with our mentors, cooperate with them.

The third prerequisite of this path is the *wisdom of emptiness*. This is more difficult. We could go into the wisdom of emptiness forever, but let's not. If instead we could suddenly internalize it, just like *that!* But that's not possible, we need to work at it.

I like to translate 'emptiness' as 'openness.' I think it is less confusing. Emptiness sounds like nothing, a big nothing, and that is not what is meant here. The meaning is closer to openness, in the sense that there is no obstruction to things relating to other things in infinite ways. Everything comes not of itself but of its infinite relatedness, because everything is related to everything. There is no node or hook, no beginning or end or middle, no self or other that can stop

relativity. We are all in a network, all interconnected. And understanding emptiness is the sort of mental act, the intuition of how that interconnectedness really works.

So the emptiness that this wisdom refers to isn't just any kind of emptiness, not like the void we can fall into, not like Nietzsche's abyss or Heidegger's nothingness, or anything like that. In this context emptiness is the lack of anything, or any part of anything, that is not related to anything else; and in the case of the self, emptiness is the lack of self that is unrelated to anything else, the lack of self that is totally independent of everything else and therefore cannot be affected by anything.

We have this habit, this self-protective habit referred to as the habit of ignorance, or mis-knowledge, or prejudice -- what I like to call *the self-reifying habit*. I am bringing in a key word here to describe one of our normal human self-protective habits, which is to feel that we are more real than we actually are. Think of it, to yourself, from your point of view: don't you seem to be more real than I am and than everyone else is? Everybody else comes and goes, but you are always there, really there. We like to think, "Well, I am the only living person around." Hume wondered at one point if everybody else was an automaton ... How would we know?

Emptiness is like that, the understanding that the self and our self-protectiveness tend to emphasize the separateness between "I" and others, and other things. Of course, if we were really separate we'd be dead, because with

something really separate nothing can go in, and so we could not take anything in, we could not take food in, we couldn't take love in, we couldn't work or connect with others. So we'd be dead. All that shows you how separate we really are. We are distinct, and our distinction comes from the specific infinite set of relationships with reality that we have, a set which is always changing, always flowing. But we're not separate. We have a self-protective habit, we have this mental orienting device, or system, that says, "I'm walking here, I'm here, this is me, get out of my way." In the Buddhist view that is linked to the reason why most cosmologies start with the words "In the beginning ..." It is not because there is any beginning; there is never a beginning. If there is a beginning where did it come from? Out of a void, they say. How could that be, how can anything come out of nothing? Have you ever seen something, anything, coming out of nothing? So what kind of thing is that, what are we talking about? It's all mental, that hard self is mental construction, it's just like an idea, an idea of something that doesn't exist.

A self is a boundary that we create to get a sense of security that is false, a sense of self that is based on the idea that "I'm really different, I have the power not to relate to you, at least in my mind I do, I can imagine it that way ..."

We can clear that false sense of security out of the way by using this notion of emptiness on the self. Selflessness is a required basic wisdom here. We are talking about going on a hero's journey, and for that we need selflessness.

Could you get a new life without going through an identity crisis first? No! You

have to have an identity crisis first, you have to find out that you are not really who you thought you were.

So, if you weren't selfless you couldn't become a better self. That is essential for us. The wisdom of emptiness requires an understanding of the real story of our identity, where it comes from and how it is produced. This is important, because it has to do with how we are stuck in our ordinary sense of self, a self we have created, based on our evolutionary instincts and our childhood development.

In our childhood we choose to love either our mother or father, our aunt or uncle, whoever it is we identify with, one or the other, or some aspects of one and the other. Out of that we weave a sense of self, and that sense of self becomes a habit and the main character in our story, our drama, our film production. And unless we get that self out of the way we can't start over again.

We need selflessness, and that applies not just to persons but to things, too. Emptiness tells us something important. People may say, "Oh, I understand selflessness, I have selflessness." We are all raised and educated in a materialist philosophy, in modern science. Modern science tells us that we have a body and a brain but the mind doesn't matter. We certainly don't have souls, forget that. And maybe spirits? No, I don't think so. We are all educated as materialists, and so it is easy for us to think of selflessness, in the sense that I don't have a self, I can think that I'm just a body. But emptiness in Buddhism says something much

more profound, it goes much deeper. It says that we don't have a body either. We don't even have genes, or atoms.

If you look at anything, if you examine anything, what is it made of, really? My colleague Miles Neale likes to talk about how, when he looks at his pants, and then at the button of his pants, or at any one component of his pants, and he examines them, the fact that the fabric was made by some people from some place or another, with a pattern that was sent from France; production was organized by the office in San Francisco; parts were sewn together by many people with thread from here and there, then assembled in China and shipped over here -- and then we buy them. But where are the real pants? Are they in the fabric, are they the fabric? And when they become rags are they still pants? When I throw them out and they don't fit anymore, or when I cut them and use them as shorts, are they still pants? And if they weren't pants to begin with and they weren't pants to end with, then when were they pants? Where do we draw the line?

This kind of analysis helps us to see how things really work, not based on what we think of ourselves and how we relate to them, like, "I am here, I'm Joe, and these are my pants." Things work based on what is actually there: a human mind and body set that is an emanation of many millions of years of evolution. Something happened on the planet a long time ago, with carbon. Then, some millions of years later, here it is, this funny thing walking around, this creature that is "me!" That's how it is, that's what I find when I really look at me objectively,

scientifically. Emptiness helps us to go through the analysis. It helps us to look not just at ourselves scientifically or objectively, but also at our reality and understand it, as it is. And it's mostly a story, a virtual reality we have created, that's what neuroscience is telling us now. Most of what we see, and most of what we perceive and respond to in the world is virtually generated from inside, from memories. And that works just fine. If we had no memory, no capacity to remember, we would need to learn every day everything all over again; how far would we get?

I sometimes go to Vermont to see my sister. I have two sisters up there, one is retired. We get in the car and I drive, and six to eight hours later we are there. I say to myself, "Oh, how did that happen?" I don't remember so well, in a way I am amazed that I didn't make a wrong turn somewhere because I wasn't really paying so much attention. We drove and we stopped and we started again and we got there. How did we get there? We got there even if I wasn't paying so much attention, because there was a program running in the memory that allowed me to get there. And that freed my attention to do something else.

What if the program is wrong? What if, as Hal, the supercomputer in *2001 Space Odyssey*, the sci-fi classic, it goes crazy and starts killing off the astronauts? And what about us, if we have a program that is a nightmare from evolution, or a nightmare from childhood, that is killing us off, killing off our possibilities, our opportunities, our choices, as it says "Gee, I am the traumatized child, and the world really sucks, because nobody has come to rescue me, so if

is just going to get worse and worse." And then it does. Then I can't get up in the morning. I don't want to do that. I don't want to do anything. I am not open to that so don't give me another day, I don't want another day, I just want to be miserable ... And so we are.

We all do this at some point, we all have ruts. I see some of you are smiling, you recognize this. We all have ruts, we dig them and then we get stuck in them, we get stuck out of habit, and we can't get out of them, or so it seems, because they seem to be so real. Here the wisdom of emptiness can help us to dig ourselves out of the rut. Emptiness helps us understand, it helps us look at our thoughts and our perceptions in a way that is more open, with more possibilities. That's why it's important. So, what are you thinking? What are you really looking at? We have to be able to get over what seems to be reality in order to have the imagination to re-envision ourselves. And to get there we have to have a crisis, a break, so we don't see what we used to see; or we just don't see it in the same way. We are not sure that it is there, whatever it is. In this way everything becomes less rigid, more fluid. And that is what emptiness is for.

Emptiness is openness. If I am going to trade my normal sense of 'Joe-dom,' if we're going to trade our perception of self from mediocre and ordinary to heroic and extraordinary, we want to make sure that we don't turn that new heroic vision into another rigid self, another cage, another mindless movie, a rigid formula for living, like "Now, I am Sheer Brilliance, get out of my way." We

don't want that, we don't want to trade one cage for a bigger and better cage -- we want to get out of the cage altogether.

Once we have some understanding of emptiness we reflect on it, and we expand our understanding. Everything turns out to be empty, so we can't actually have a more practical flight simulator for our new life than emptiness of the self, or selflessness. Emptiness allows us to keep changing, developing. The new self has to have transparency in order to be flexible with the world, changing and growing, and not getting stuck anywhere -- and that is truly self-dissolving and liberating,

So, there are three prerequisites for this type of Tibetan Buddhist practice: renunciation, compassion and emptiness. You build them up as you practice. This is a cumulative process. You lay a foundation and then it sort of builds on itself as it helps to free us, to open us. As these qualities become stronger and build on each other, they make it easier for us to let go, more and more.

For example, if you are caught in a bad rap with a group of people, at that moment it's easier to let go than it is to have compassion for the others. First you let go; and then, when you feel a little relief, when you regain your ground so-to-speak, then maybe you can feel a little compassion for the people around you. Once you start feeling compassion you feel connected. Soon you realize that you need to learn to connect in a helpful way, presently and unconditionally. And so you do. This is openness.



You can think of this process as going up a chain, like a food chain but now it's an awareness chain, and each link represents a different level of our nervous system, of being aware and alive. In this case you go up the chain by letting go of the self, at different levels. We first let go of clinging and grasping; then we let go of our sense of isolation from others, and so we can have compassion; and finally we let go of any sense of having to hold on, to grasp, an old bias that now is our awareness. In short, it is a process of letting go: more and more letting go, more and more opening up.

Emptiness is represented by the sun disc on the cushion that Manjushri is sitting on. But we actually see him sitting on a moon disc, I think for the sake of aesthetics ... go figure, this is a fuzzy art, an improvisational art.

Once you have the three prerequisites, the next thing is initiation. What is an initiation? There is a lot of buzz about initiations. In fact, I should make you all aware that Gelek Rinpoche, a dear old teacher I met back in 1979 in India who is the recognized incarnation of the Healing Mother, White Tara, in the Dalai Lama's tradition, is coming to teach White Tara and give us permission to practice it. Initiation here means that we need a guide, we don't change ourselves in isolation, there has to be a catalyst. That catalyst is a relationship, and in this tradition it is the relationship with a mentor. In the West, Freud called the ego "the precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes." That is in translation, maybe his German was much clearer than that. I like to translate this definition of the ego as the accumulation of lost love objects. It means that we grow as a

person by loving others, and that's how we become who we are, because who we choose to love determines who we are. The mentor is there as a model of what we want to be; we learn to imitate our mentors, and imitation is a form of love, we love our mentors by imitating them. Also, a spiritual mentor -- or psychic healing mentor, or heroic mentor -- gives us a sense of hope and possibility. And that is what we are looking for, because that is what we need to spark the process of change in us.

We also need a congenial ideal. We don't want to become just anybody else. We want our own vision of who we want to become, and we need somebody else to assist us in realizing that vision. That is why in this tradition we have both. We have the ideal archetypal heroic images to build our vision, and the living mentors to help us realize that vision. The heroic images are like a portable version of our aspirations. We project these images onto the mentor, but just for awhile. It may be hard to totally identify with the live mentor. For me for example, it would be hard to identify totally with being Gelek Rinpoche; he is Tibetan, his ways are of a completely different world, he was a monk for many years and he's a very different personality than I am. But I can identify with an ideal that we both share. If he is willing to see himself as an ideal, say as an emanation of Sheer Brilliance, and I am willing to see myself in the same way, we can totally identify with one another at that level, using our minds as connectors.

That's where the imagery comes in. The imagery can be very helpful here. It's like an uplink, a link to the qualities that I want to have myself. Theoretically, if the other person doesn't have qualities but we have a really good mind, the sort of mind that lets us project the qualities we want into the other person, it could be okay. But for most of us it's easier to have a mentor who actually has the credentials and the qualities that we want, at least some of them. This does not mean that we need to find a perfect person. Nobody short of Buddhahood is perfect. Even the Dalai Lama says he hasn't gotten there yet. I guess we are all on the same bus.

With the images and the mentor we go through the process of mentor bonding. Once the connection is made, in the highest level of initiation which is called the *Unexcelled Yoga Tantra Initiation*, we get four blessings, or four messages, from the mentor. *One* is that our bodies and minds are vessels of enlightenment, vessels of genius. They are not the ordinary things that we think they are, they are vessels of enlightenment, and they are pure. *Two*, our passion is the basis for inspiration, and for pure passion. We can refine our passion, we can work on it at the subliminal level and purify it. Even the most base, the lowest of passions, aggressive, sexual or whatever, can be transformed into pure passionate energy. *Three*, we have the capacity for intuitive wisdom, and that is Sheer Brilliance. When we experience bliss, when we get into a flow of bliss, which happens when we are tapping into our inner passion and seeing ourselves as pure, we can use it to shed our old skin of selfhood and bias, and to

re-mold, redevelop. That is called the intuitive wisdom initiation. And, finally, *four*, there is the initiation itself, standing for what the mentor says to you about what it is like to be enlightened, and how you can become enlightened.

Another way to think of it is that the initiation here gets you to that state where you are who you think you are. The word itself, 'initiation,' is about making something a reality, like a performative statement -- which means that you perform an identity and by doing so you become that identity.

It's like studying for a diploma and one day somebody says to you, "Now you are doctor of this" or "a master of that" or "a bachelor of so and so." And that is the moment when you become that. Another example is when you are getting married and you go through the ritual, but you are not married until the minister pronounces you married, when he says for example "I now pronounce you man and wife!" or whatever.

In the same way, when you say, "I am Sheer Brilliance" and you say it with conviction, knowing what to point to, then you are really becoming that. That is the secret teaching here, that we *do* have the power to re-assemble ourselves, we can work with the raw materials to remake a self and a life. We can choose from within us, from all the potential causes that can free us so that we can help others. Then we call ourselves that, we act as if we were that, then we become that. We have that power. And that is pretty cool.

It's like having somebody that says to you, "I don't see you as stuck as you see yourself, I don't see you in the limited way that you see yourself, I see something in you, I see a spark in you, I see potential in you, I see a possibility in you that you don't see."

So here they are, formally presented, in very technical terms, the instructions for the path of transformation and the equipment that you need, equipment that you actually have within you to use on that path. The essential point here is to have somebody that thinks better of you than you do. For most of us it isn't that hard, because we tend to be too hard on ourselves.

Some of you have asked me, how do you find the balance between believing that you are Sheer Brilliance, and seeing through the illusion of it? This is a very important question, a very profound and excellent question. That balance is really subtle; this is an intuitive art. We'll talk about this later on. For now let us touch on some of the other main issues.

At the level of practice that we are talking about now, we have two benchmarks, so to speak, that can tell us that we are actually getting it right. One is called *divine pride*, or *Buddha pride*; the other is called *vivid appearance*.

Normal pride is "I'm me, some days I think I'm okay, some days I think I stink, and some days I'm somewhere in between." But, what if I thought, "Gee, I am really a Buddha, somewhere in there." And then I can act like one. At least

this would help me act like one more often. That is divine pride, or Buddha pride, it is what makes the ordinary self dissolve.

When we re-create ourselves, when we are envisioning ourselves in a new way, divine pride is one part of this new perception, this new image of ourselves. And, to secure that new self, to seal that new way of being, we say, "I am Sheer Brilliance." There are specific formulas for doing that, there are mantras you can say here. We will talk more about that later, there are sealing formulas for each step.

Then, we start to actually have glimpses of our new self. It's like I'm not really Joe, not the way I thought of being Joe, I am something else; it's like looking in the mirror and seeing Sheer Brilliance instead of Joe. This may feel weird, like a weird acid trip. Nonetheless, if you have little flashes or glimpses, even if it's just for a second that you can see yourself in that new way, that is *vivid appearance*. It can begin with glimpses and, with practice, the glimpses become more stable.

And so with *divine pride* I dissolve my old self, and with *vivid appearance* I see my new self -- and I am Sheer Brilliance.

In order to do this practice correctly you have to understand exactly what Sheer Brilliance is. Sheer Brilliance is a Buddha like any Buddha, and like any of the deities that we are talking about here; they are all the same, there is only one deity, there is only one Buddha, and that is the blissful, compassionate realization of emptiness. There are mantras for this stage of the practice. One

of them is "Om Shunyata Jnana Vajra Svabhava Atmako Aham!" which means "I have a self whose nature is the diamond intuition of emptiness." Shunyata means emptiness and *jnana* means knowing; *vajra svabhava* can be translated as the diamond nature of the intuition of emptiness; *atma* as in *atmako* is the Sanskrit word for self, I; and *aham* means "I am."

So you have to know what emptiness is, and you have to know how blissful intuition can realize emptiness, you have to know what that would feel like. Also, you have to know how to call yourself, how to call this new self when you see it. This is not a simple practice. You have to have guidance to know whether you are on the right track or not. That is why you need a mentor. Nobody should do this at home alone; you need supervision. This is like performing psychosurgery on yourself, you are playing around with your identity, monkeying around with it, recreating it, and you don't want to get it wrong.

On the other hand, if you don't monkey around with your identity, if you don't try out new things, you are going to stay the same, you are going to keep reproducing the same old self. Why do we go into therapy? Because the therapist helps us as we try to rediscover our better selves. In the same way, with the supervision and the guidance of a mentor we start, slowly, by getting a feel of their way of being, and by learning, slowly, how to orient ourselves, find our bearings.

There are two stages in this process practice, the *creation stage* and the *perfection stage*. The creation stage is like being in a virtual reality, or a flight

simulator. You are going through the motions, trying to get a feel for it. And you adjust the simulation as you go, when you go off a bit. If you have good instructions you can recognize gaps and breaks between the ordinary self and the self you want to be, your Buddha self, and then close them. In this way, eventually, we get to the perfection stage. By then we've got it, it is all clear enough, we are at the level of committing ourselves to it, entirely.

By the time you reach this level of fully committing your way of being to this whole new identity you will be a better judge of yourself. You will recognize whether you are right or wrong, whether you're really feeling Buddha pride or you are just feeling ordinary human pride dressed up as a Buddha.

Don't worry if you are not getting all of this. We will come back to it. This is a very subtle art, requiring a subtle balancing between re-discovering our new and better self, and at the same time recognizing the emptiness of this new self. It takes courage just to contemplate practicing it. You have to have courage and confidence, a lot of confidence, in yourself and your abilities, to go through this process. When the time is ripe, with a little help from your friends, and by listening to the guidance of your mentor, you will be able to get it right. I will just say to you, you can do it, I trust you, you can make it, there are instructions that you can learn and practices that can build your confidence. So, when you decide and you call it like it is, that you are the new Buddha, you'll be right. And that's really how it is, just a matter of calling it what it is, with conviction.



We normally walk around with a core shame-based sense of self that is what we think of ourselves. I was raised Catholic. And when you are raised Catholic you have original sin, you are born with the original sin, you are sort of guilty before proven innocent. And for the rest of your life you feel you have to sort of play it down, go to confession, and all of that. In this tradition it's the other way around. We are Buddhas to begin with, that is our nature, we all have Buddha nature. But we cover that nature with confusion and mental afflictions to a point that we don't know we are Buddhas, we don't feel like Buddhas anymore. That is one very special thing about this tradition, that it really believes in us, human beings, and it wants to give us the confidence that we need to overcome. It's not so hard; but we need to bring our full minds to it.

You really need a living mentor. Not just because this tradition is culturally new to us, but because in the last 500 years or so, we have lost our connections with our native cultures, our religious traditions, we have become very skeptical, unable to trust. As moderns, as ego-driven market consumers, we are skeptics about trusting anybody. From a Buddhist point of view, in general, skepticism is good. We should not take anything on faith, we should examine, we should be critical. The issue is that many times we overdo it. We find quality but we still don't want to buy into it, because we are living in this anti-hero cosmology where nobody can really be *that* good, good enough for us to admire and trust. There has to be dirt somewhere; and if there is any dirt, then there isn't anything good there, it's *all* bad, and we dismiss it.

The mentor-student relationship is hard for us, because we think of relationships in very black-and-white terms. Hopefully we all will find a good mentor, a mentor like Geshe Wangyal, Bob Thurman's first teacher. The thing is in our present culture we each have many teachers. How many professors do you have when you go to college, 100? Well, it is the same everywhere, East and West. When Buddhists of this tradition say mentor, they are using the term very loosely. If you read Bob Thurman's "Jewel Tree of Tibet" you will find that in this tradition it is not about a mentor but about mentors, there are hundreds of them, up there, in the jewel tree. It's a very crowded tree. And we each make our own tree, with our own mentors, people who have inspired us to be our better selves. And in the middle you put your own favorite mentor. You can have a favorite but don't feel that you have to have that very special one, the only one that is like your mother or father. Although you might. You might run into somebody with whom it just clicks, someone you are very drawn to and at the same time he or she is available. But that is not the way the tradition actually works. In fact, there is this saying, that the best lama is the one that lives three valleys over. That means not too close, not too far. And the student uses the lama as a role model of specific things.

We can start studying this practice with books, but at a certain point we need other people, people to guide us. They don't have to be exalted mentors, just people that have something that helps us move forward, like some kind of understanding, knowledge or confidence that we respect and admire. In this

tradition the criteria of a good mentor are elaborately spelled out. Finding a mentor is not like finding love in a romance novel; it's not going to happen suddenly. It's more like finding the right doctor: you check the candidates' credentials, like where were they trained, and how much experience have they had practicing and mentoring. Then you actually meet in person, and you see if there is the right chemistry. That is the way to find good mentors.

Your mentor doesn't have to be Tibetan. My first teacher was Bob Thurman. He was a Tibetan monk for a year but that hardly qualifies him as Tibetan. On the other hand, he is exceedingly brilliant, he is super dedicated, I don't know many people who are as dedicated as Bob; and he has a lot of other qualities. He's got flaws also, he's human, but I've had him as a mentor, very comfortably and ably, for many aspects of my practice, not all of them. I would not consider him as a mentor for everything in all ways; but in many ways I do. And I would say the same about all of my Tibetan mentors. Unfortunately many are deceased. But I still have a mental relationship with them.

I wouldn't say that there is any one person that can be a mentor for everything, maybe with the exception of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. In that case I would say, "I give it all to you, you'll do a better job running my life." But in all other cases most likely I'd say no. I'd say, maybe this lama has that compassion, that particular quality that I could really learn from; and this teacher has that kind of wisdom, of discernment that I am looking for. And so we learn from different mentors, we have different role models.

Technically speaking, if you want to do this practice in the traditional way and get the blessing of the lineage, you have to find at least a lama who will take you through the whole ritual. Nalanda Institute is not a religious community; we are a secular educational community, we teach you how to do the practice but we don't go through the ritual. That is why we have invited Gelek Rinpoche to visit us and do the rituals, for those of you who want the traditional stamp of approval and want to feel connected to the lineage.

Before moving on let me call your attention to the role-modeling practice which we went through in the opening meditation, albeit very quickly. The practice has four stages, or phases. They may sound familiar, we've gone through them before. You start out with the mentor in front of you, in a very idealized form; then you get a little closer and you start to identify with the mentor; then the mentor blesses you and shows you that you have his essence within you already; eventually, in the last phase, the mentor dissolves into you and becomes you, becomes one with you.

These four phases are reflected in the structure itself of this process practice. First, there is *Action tantra*, or *idealization*; this is not so different from what we do as kids when we idealize sports athletes, or rock stars, we are gazing and watching from afar, just that. Then comes *Performance tantra*, or *identification*; now we are engaging in a kind of flirtation with our ideal, our role model; we feel giddy, intoxicated from being around somebody who we really admire. Third is *Yoga tantra*, or *integration*; we internalize our role model, we

embrace our model, we are being touched inwardly by that person; and we are finding within ourselves a feel and a taste of the Hero, a hero like the hero in books, the Divine. Fourth and last is *Optimal Level Tantra*, or *Unexcelled Yoga Tantra*. It is mutual connection, consummation and satisfaction; now you feel within you, within your mentor or within others the presence and taste of that special way of being.

So, I want to emphasize again that this process of transformation comes with prerequisites. This is very important. One is you have to go into it through *initiation* by a qualified teacher. The relationship with the mentor works as a gateway to the new way of being. You practice, and the mentor is there to guide you to transform yourself, as a model.

Now we come to what we are focusing now in this chapter, which is the journey of transformation. This journey has three main stages: the preliminaries, the creation stage, and the perfection stage.

The *preliminaries* are for building up three things: renunciation, compassion and wisdom; we accumulate them gradually. Second, the *creation stage* is for building a flight simulator, trying it out, re-envisioning and rebuilding ourselves. Or, to continue an earlier metaphor, we are learning how to make a new movie, and we are learning to produce the right movie for ourselves and our lives. And third, the *perfection stage* is when it's no longer a movie, but the real thing: now we are really transforming, in a big way, now it's not just our

perception or conception of ourselves, but the very fabric of our nervous system: our neurochemistry, our emotional life ... in short, our whole way of being.

Let's go through an example, and let's take renunciation as a given. So, if I want to become the better me, to become an altruist, a Hero Altruist, I have to fulfill two prerequisites, I have to develop compassion and emptiness. There are two ways I can do that, a slow way and a quick way. The slow way is through Mahayana practice, which is a relatively simple lay practice. The quick way is Tantric practice. The way to do it is to find the raw materials inside of us to build a new mind and a new body. One is open-mindedness. With open-mindedness I can dissolve my ordinary sense of self and tap into new qualities; and then, coming out of that openness, that spacious openness, I can develop a way of being that is much more open and flexible, sort of dreamlike, where I can see myself as less hard and solid, more fluid and plastic. We begin to practice in this way, we craft ourselves as more compassionate beings, slowly, as in a dream. As an altruist, a Hero Altruist, open-mindedness is my new mind and compassion is my new body.

So we find open-mindedness (I like to call it "radical open-mindedness") and we identify with it -- "that is me." We find unconditional love and compassion and we identify with it as well. "Now open-mindedness is my mind and compassion is my body." And so we put them together, and then we become altruists, enlightened altruists, Heroic Altruists.

Now, how do we develop these qualities? In the sutras, in the Mahayana tradition, you develop them separately: some of the time we are practicing emptiness, some of the time we are practicing compassion. Eventually though, you have to bring the two together. On the other hand, in this practice, we are practicing it all in one sitting, together. How do we do that? Remember, when we did the opening meditation before class we dissolved everything into space, which is really, ultimately, emptiness. Any advanced tantric practice begins with the practitioner saying, "Suddenly everything melts into emptiness ..." It's a good start. Suddenly the world dissolves completely, and now it is going to be put together again, re-created. Emptiness in tantra is the equivalent of open-mindedness in sutra. If you remember the opening meditation, out of that emptiness the sun disc and the exclamation point arise. Now I have the material, and I can build with it, I'm building something, something that eventually will get me a new person -- and that is the equivalent of my embodying compassion in sutra. So I've got these two things. As Joni Mitchell says, "We are stardust, we are golden, and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden." Somehow, we've gotten lost. We have to remember that we are stardust. We dissolve ourselves into the stardust and then we come back and be in the garden. When we dissolve ourselves we can change, evolve.

Part of the reason why this practice of transformation is quicker has to do with its approach to death and the self. Do any of you here know anyone who has had a near-death experience? People who have had that experience talk

about how it was like they could see themselves from a distance, like an out-of-body experience; others see a white light, and others may see something else. But whatever they see, most people who have a significant brush with death and come out of it in the other side feel a tremendous sense of the preciousness of life. They start all over again, and they can really take off and develop, change their patterns in ways that they never did before, they become more generous, peaceful and tolerant.

Now, imagine what would happen if you went through a near-death experience every morning, or six times a day. In serious practice that's what you do, in a way, with the help of visualization and your flight simulator; six times a day you are dying and then you are being reborn. You can begin to see why with this practice you might change more quickly.

So, we are now prepared to build a new self. What do we build with, what are my raw materials? They are mental, they are sort of my states of mind. This reminds me of Shakespeare, of a line in *The Tempest*, "We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and our little life is rounded with a sleep." In the context of this practice, the sleep is the formless state; and the dream is the form, the body, the compassion-like state, the life-like state. There are these two states, we all have these two states. How so? Just think about your day, and I mean your full day. We think of our day as if it was just that part of the day when we are awake. But our sleep is also part of our day, and part of our lives. Most of us spend about eight hours, or a third of the day, asleep, in a completely different



state of mind. That state of mind is either dreaming or, hopefully, blissed out in some heavenly realm deep inside of our nervous system, somewhere.

So that's who we are, what we're made of. If I want to make a new "me" I need some of that raw material lying inside of me, I have to learn how to tap into that deep, formless layer of consciousness, that deep state of mind where we are constantly recharging our batteries, and re-becoming, so to speak. Actually, it is in some deep state, like deep sleep, that, oftentimes, we are pruning the memories that we accumulated through the day. We get rid of the useless ones, the traumatic ones, the stressful ones, and in this way we recreate ourselves. Normally we just prune our memories unconsciously. The art we are learning here is to do it consciously.

In this art there is a dream yoga, there is a sexual yoga, and there is a yoga of dying. We practice with altered states of experience that are normally off limits to our consciousness, and that this tradition puts within our reach, for us to explore and use as raw material for reshaping our self. Now I can go for the whole thing, not just the teeny tiny island of consciousness that was the old self, the old Joe. I am going to take the whole Joe, whoever I am, and that includes my thoughts when I am awake as well as what comes up in my deep sleep, and in dreams -- that is in short the unconscious that Freud studied. And so I become an altruist, a heroic altruist or an altruistic hero, or a genius, by taking the raw materials that I have and converting them into bodies of enlightenment.

In the traditional teachings, there are three types of raw materials -- not just the two extremes that we talked about based on Shakespeare's quote, the formal and the formless; there is also an intermediate state. We went through them in the opening meditation: there is the space, which is formless; there are little bits of form that are just developing; and then there is the fully elaborated form. You can think of these three states as the cycle we all go through each day, of deep sleep, dreaming and waking. That cycle covers the full range of our consciousness. You can also think of them as death, development and rebirth, or emanation, which is the full embodiment of a new way of life.

So, I take those states of mind and I simulate them in meditation practice, I use them to simulate the basic facts of my life: I was born, I developed and I am going to die. Only now, in this case, we run the movie that is our life beginning at the other end, with death: I am going to die as the being that I am, I am going to develop a new way of being, and I am going to be reborn as a new being.

When we are on the cushion and we dissolve everything into emptiness, our thinking process looks something like, "Now I am practicing dying. I am taking emptiness as a path, a path that will take me not to a normal death but a conscious death, the death of my delusions; and so to developing the mind of a Buddha and the body of a Buddha." Actually, the traditional teaching is that the Buddha has three bodies. The *truth body*, the *intermediate body* and the *emanation body*. These correspond to death, development and rebirth.

So, let's say we are going to practice developing a truth body. I can use my meditation practice or my sleep, they both work. I imagine my death state, I go through the eight dissolutions, and I am going to convert it into a path for developing a truth body. What does that mean? I am going to take the glimpses of openness that I get when I visualize everything during meditation, or when I go into deep sleep, or when I have a near-death experience, and I am going to recognize them as just what I need, the raw material out of which I can build my new mind, open mind, Buddha mind. That's what I have to do, take those little glimpses and build on them; out of them I will build a Buddha mind. Personally, I think that it is not necessary to buy into the Tibetan cosmology in order to understand this practice and benefit from it. This is very fortunate for us materialists: if we believe that we have one life only this is the practice for us, because this is the only practice that they say allows us to achieve enlightenment in one lifetime, and that is if we really practice diligently. How much can we take to the next life, I don't know. I haven't done the experiment yet, at least not as far as I am aware. I can only tell you what the tradition says.

More importantly, I can say that these are tools to prepare to die, to die not in an ordinary way but in a very transformative way. When you are constantly practicing the dissolution process, you are practicing dissolving into death, and in this way you befriend death so that death is no longer an enemy, a threat, the annihilation of who you are. As you change your relationship with

death it becomes a doorway to liberation, to free your mind, to purge your mind of the heavy baggage that you've been carrying for a while. And then you choose a new, pure, healthier, better way to re-create yourself. I guarantee you that if you were to have a near-death experience after practicing in this way for a while, it would make a big difference ... And it would be great if you could come back and tell us about it.

Let's say we take the first immersion into formlessness as *the path*. We imagine formlessness as death: we go through the eight dissolutions and when we are dissolving everything is dissolving. We are visualizing formlessness as the moment of death, and then we mentally try to change it, to convert it into the path to having a *truth body*, which is a mind and body of pure clarity and openness, a mind that is fully realizing the openness of everything. This is the Buddha's *truth body*. And it is the first conversion.

After we die or go into a state where things begin to reboot in subtle form and we start to recreate and regenerate some formal way of being. We take what would normally be an afterlife, or a developmental process, say in the womb, or in childhood, and we re-imagine it as the *beatific body*, which is the second Buddha body, the body that enjoys the freedom to create pure form, pure bliss form, form that is not afflicted, that is blissful, expressing the freedom of enlightenment. This is a path to having a blissful transition, a blissful way of recreating ourselves for re-emerging into the world. This is the second conversion.

You can think of it as getting up in the morning after a very deep sleep. How do you want to feel when you get up? Do you want to get up feeling, "Oh my God, another day, all the things I have to do ...!" Or do you want to get up feeling energized and ready to join the living, the people that you want to help? This practice helps you build blissful transitioning. But it's an art. And you don't need the cosmology to learn the art. You can learn this art even if you don't buy into the cosmology.

We learn to transform life, gradually, until we get to fully embody the life we have developed in our vision. And that is the third Buddha body, the *emanation body*. Now we have a full adult body, and we can take on a partner and have children, spiritual children. We create a family and a community, one that isn't just about us, about "me" but about the whole world around me. And so we create a new world, with a new sense of family, a new sense of community. That is the third conversion.

The form body, our material body, is made of body and mind. In the case of the Buddha, the simplest model of the Buddha has a mind of total openness and a body of total compassion. That is the level of practice we've been talking about. There is a subtler and more complicated form, where the body of compassion is filtered into two bodies, one is bliss and the other is helpfulness. If we compare these two bodies, I experience bliss as an emotional experience; in a way it is like an aesthetic experience. But if the experience is one where I actually make myself helpful, to you or anybody else, that is a much more fully

embodied way of being compassionate, and of expressing the joy of enlightenment.

We work with the same raw materials in the creation stage and the perfection stage. And we go through the same three states. Just remember sleep, dream, waking; or death, development and rebirth. It's the same thing. One sign that we are getting this practice down is that living beings start to appear to us as Buddhas, sounds appear to us as mantras, and gestures appear to us as part of the dance of enlightenment. In the context of our day-to-day experience, we can think of the times that we meet enlightened people, and we can see the enlightenment in them; maybe it's in the way they move, we can see the grace, or we can feel the compassion or the bliss in them. But we need to remember that this is only a filter, not an end in itself. We are not trying to create a new and better cage, a new fortress of fantasy where everyone appears as enlightened, and to lock ourselves in that fortress. The fantasy is supposed to be translucent, transparent, filtered. It's a fantasy designed to give us a reference point, a suggestion about how to develop a real-life experience in a helpful way, in a way that nurtures further development for this way of living.

For example, if you find someone who really makes you think, see him, visualize him as Manjushri, as Sheer Brilliance, that's part of how this practice plays out. It's a very interesting form of mixing mental perception -- not fantasy -- with coarse sense perception. More generally, when you have meaningful experiences you should be filtering them through these images.

There are many questions regarding tantra and gender, for example how women might be more attracted to or adept at this kind of practice, and how this relates to a monastic tradition of mostly men. Tantra is considered to be a more feminine practice because it is an embodied form of spiritual practice. In her work called "Passionate Enlightenment," Miranda Shaw makes this case very elaborately, in a very interesting way. Then there are many stories, like the one about Marpa, one of the abbots of Nalanda, who was all puffed up with his knowledge. His housekeeper once said to him, "You think you know something? You haven't got a clue, you are clueless, go out and speak to that woman, the witch who lives around the corner." He went out and he did it, he was smart enough to listen to her. And she was the one who initiated him into the Tantras! There are a lot of stories like that.

Perhaps there was a little more gender balance in India, although not really or not much, I would say. Traditionally the West has been the more advanced culture in terms of gender balance and equality. So take it this way if you will, the positive way, and that is that women are more gifted at practicing the tantra, and therefore will learn more quickly.

From a neurobiological point of view, there are some reports that the corpus callosum in the female brain is more connected to the right brain, that is more connected to intuitive experiences, sensory and emotional. In an evolutionary context this makes sense. You can imagine that if you were taking care of the young you'd need to be more connected; and if you were

responsible for the food and you had to go out and kill something to eat, you'd need to be more disconnected. So men are more disconnected and women are more connected. They say women are more gifted at this practice. In fact, even in the standard Mahayana practice the primary deity out of which everything grows is a woman, a goddess, the goddess of wisdom. It is not Manjushri but his soul mate, Prajna.

In this tradition the sun is feminine and the moon is masculine, instead of the way around, as it is in our culture or regular Indian culture. Nonetheless, India was still a patriarchal culture and Tibet was probably even more so. Although there was polyandry. So perhaps there was some gender flexibility. There were many women teachers and practitioners. There were orders of nuns in India and in most of Asia but not in Tibet. But there are a lot of lay practitioners and teachers who are women.

American women who are practicing Buddhism may take to these teachings more so than men. I personally think the trend is for a more gender-neutral, equal-gender representation in the teachings, the teachers, the lineages and the iconography. Buddhist Tantra is one of the few spiritual traditions I know of where you have feminine deities. For example there is Tara. I mentioned that Gelek Rinpoche is going to teach White Tara as part of this course. Anyway, I think the rise of feminine Buddhism in the West is coming. His Holiness himself says that his next incarnation may be a woman. It will be interesting to see how it all plays out.



## Chapter 10

### Setting the Stage for Life Change

We're in an exciting point of our journey together in this four-year program. We're going over a range of different techniques that take us to a healthier way of being, towards sustainable happiness, towards what we call a contemplative way of living. We are gathering tools that help us bridge the gaps between the life we are living and the one we want. This is a cumulative process. First we need the tools that allow us to stop the reactivity inside us, the stress and trauma energy in our minds and bodies; most of us could spend all the time trying to do just that. But we're living in the world, we can't just sit back and work on that 24/7, and interact with others only when we're calm, because we're often face-to-face with people who are not trying to calm down, people who are stressed out and who might trigger us into reactive behaviors. We need special tools to manage that triggering environment, and to remain on a path of peace and clarity within. In this context we talked about the so-called *mind training* or *mind clearing* practices, *lojong* in Tibetan Buddhism, or "social-emotional kung-fu," as I like to call this type of practice. Mind training helps us turn our traumatized sense of reactivity to others, our childhood sense of vulnerability to others, into mature empathy and compassion. Then we can come up with, and use, mature strategies to engage in our intensely social

environment in a positive way, and face life's challenges from a position of strength and possibility.

Those are the tools we got to know in the first two years of this four-year program. And there are more. Tibetans have kindly provided us with many tools to be in the world and remain calm, and to be the calm person on the rocking boat as we move toward enlightenment. Getting there is said to take three incalculable eons. But Americans don't want to wait that long, especially since we think we have only one life, which may or may not be true. We'll find out in time, I guess. Anyhow, Tibetans have tools that speed up the process and help us transform ourselves and our world even in a single lifetime. These are creative tools, cultural tools, tools for changing the way we perceive.

In general, how we perceive depends on the software that we develop through our childhood as we become social and cultural beings. That software gives us our identity. It tells us who we are, what we're part of, where we're going, what we're supposed to be doing. And that is the life story that we run through our nervous system, constantly. But, courtesy of Tibet, we have the tools to change our life, our life story, the movie that is our life, tools that use imagery that has the power to allow us to perceive differently, to open our perception and transform us. Normally our perception of the world is like a program running on default mode. But what ancient contemplatives told us -- and what modern neuroscience is telling us also -- is that most of what we perceive is our own mental activity projected out into the world. From a neuroscience point of view,

we're all having a sort of interactive dream, a day dream -- and that's our reality. In that context, if I am sane and healthy it means that most of what I perceive is in agreement with what everyone else perceives, which is that interactive dream -- or, at least, I can operate socially and interact effectively, enough to correct for the gaps.

This interactive dream, is it such a good dream? Couldn't it be a little better? It seems that this dream is made by us, like a hodgepodge, sort of higgledy-piggledy, as we go through childhood, trying to survive the slings and arrows of confusion and disappointment, the challenges that appear because we feel like vulnerable and sensitive little creatures in an incredibly complicated world and powerful others. If that is the case, if this sounds familiar to you, you may have made yourself a life, contributing to the interactive dream, with elements of trauma, stress and confusion. How do you change that?

If this were a mindfulness class, we would talk about being mindful of our perception, because perception, like conception, is included in mindfulness practice. We don't want to perceive automatically. As part of the discipline of mindfulness we learn to watch the mind. And as we watch the mind we slow down the machine of the mind, and its output, like slowing down a film in a camera so that we can see the frames, more slowly, even one by one. Then we can see how we are conceiving and perceiving people, places and things -- and so we begin to see that we have choices, many choices.

In tantra practice we take all that and put it on overdrive, in our flight simulator. And we're not so fully focused on our perception, as in mindfulness. We are not just perceiving things but we are making them -- actually we are re-making them. We're remaking the film of our life, we're using positive imagery to counteract the negativity that has crept into our minds and that we stay hooked on because we have a negativity bias in our minds and brains. This is a version of what happens when people with trauma go for treatment. They have flashbacks, and they can't get the traumatic images out of their minds. And every time something scares them, the traumatic images come right back, in some way. Maybe some of you don't identify with this. But from a Buddhist view we have what Western researchers call a subsyndromal condition, which means we're still several standard deviations away from having syndromes to the extent of getting a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress. We're at average torture level, so-to-speak. And the reality is that we perceive the world from the perspective of an exaggeratedly small and helpless and vulnerable person, someone who has to either prove themselves or hide, whatever it is. As adults we still see others and the world as we did in childhood: we feel we need to please others because our lives depend on them. And so we make our life, we filter our dream, we edit our movie in this slightly hairy, slightly hair-raising way -- or maybe not so slightly.

To change that we re-parent ourselves. If we have an ideal vision of the way we would like to be, we enlist supporters -- congenial mentors and guides

who affirm we can be like we would like to be -- and we use them as mirrors. Then we can re-birth ourselves and re-parent ourselves in the mirror of their optimistic view of us. So, instead of projecting my bad mommy and mad daddy images out onto the world, and thinking like a poor scared little me, I project images of truly capable parents, truly capable others who are truly and unconditionally caring and loving. We need some help to get through the glitches in reality, and we're in training, rehearsing this process of gradually being transformed, in interaction with our mentors, from our normal sense of self to an empowered, heroic sense of self. And so we train our minds, the way that pilots and astronauts train, in a flight simulator, to sprout network connections that prepare us to be the person we envision.

Richie Davidson has done some interesting research on imagery and how it works with trauma and stress, and he has found that people who can use imagery in a positive way have a peri-orbital cortex, that is the part of the prefrontal cortex around the eye which only humans have, that is more active on the left side of our brain, our verbal brain, the part that is extroverted, proactive, confident. The right side, on the other hand, is where we tend to store complicated emotions, our sensitive affect, our traumas. In some cases, when people are sleeping the left side of their brain, their left hemisphere, is less active, while their right hemisphere gets activated; this leads to anxiety and nightmares. Visualization empowers the left hemisphere to gain control back, to say "hey, we're doing okay here." It's like running a simulation, a simulation that

prepares us to become the beings we want to be. Using visualization in this way helps us to go beyond the cloud of gloom and doom, the hangovers of evolution and childhood, to be positive. And we want that.

Cognitive therapy uses *thought substitution* to change the mind's negative bias. Many times we get a negative thought, a worst-case-scenario thought, circulating in our minds, again and again. These thoughts are not harmless. The more we think these thoughts, the more we feel them. They're like magic spells. Research in neuroscience shows that the mind has this power, this quality, that how we use it shapes it -- and shapes who we become. This plasticity function is such that the more we focus on the negative, the more negative we feel and we become. We can change negative thoughts by substituting them with more realistic ones. This is cognitive therapy that actually works.

The same principle is at work in this type of practice, although here we're not just substituting thoughts but images as well, including the way we see the world. Images are a more powerful influence than thoughts. In fact, research has shown that our brain believes what we imagine vividly. I mentioned earlier the study of the vivid visualizers who were instructed to visualize red, and when a green light was placed in front of their eyes they still saw red, even their retinas were seeing red. Steven Kosslyn, who has decades of research experience with imagery and has written several books, talks about how powerful imagery is in

influencing the way the mind works, and about how much of the imagery in our perceptual system is actually mentally generated.

So think about that: your brain, your nervous system believes what your mind is seeing. But much of what you're seeing are your worst-case fears, fantasies and repressed memories. That is our very human self-protective negativity bias, deep in our brain and psychological makeup, because we're holding on to all that past stress and trauma; and that holds us back. But we can use active imagery to counteract it, to challenge it and debate with it, and so override it.

In visualization practice we begin by replacing the self temporarily and reflecting on a new self to have the experience of what it might be like to be fundamentally different. "This is how I might look, how I might feel." And we go further with visualization: "I may not be a golden boy like Manjushri, with the sword of wisdom over my head, but if I can feel like that, of only for just a moment, and get a taste of it, then maybe I will not be so much the frightened child who survived childhood. But I still can't figure out things ..." The way this works is partly because this substitution leads to a cognitive dissonance that makes us think hard about our situation; otherwise we go into the default process. If we always see ourselves just in a certain way we don't notice that we could see ourselves in another way. But if we put this practice in place, we have a regular experience of seeing ourselves differently, and how things could

be totally different. It's a very challenging practice. But it can open many possibilities for change.

These techniques to guide us in the world are profoundly social. They are part of Buddhism's *Universal Vehicle*, or *Mahayana*, a body of teachings which flourished in East Asia and Tibet. Some people call it *Northern Vehicle*. Anyway, it is focused on compassion in the social sense. This means that we're in it not just for ourselves, to release ourselves from the cycle of stress and trauma, but for everyone else also. It is clear that we are all connected. This imagery is not just out of nowhere, superimposed or extraneous; these images are part of us, of our self-image and the world we create. So let's use these images to lead us, as models. Let's try this practice and see how we can be Buddhas in a pure land, totally capable beings who help others to navigate through life in the same way, skillfully. These images that represent who I want to be need to be integrated so that their qualities become spontaneous in me. I need to practice a lot, to the point that even in my sleep I can dream my way through life, being helpful, acting like an enlightened being.

We all have the inner genius to become a Buddha, and we need to help ourselves as well as others to see that. Here we have these images and techniques to help us re-envision things in a certain way so that we can disarm our psychology and see through it all with radical openness and pure clarity, and this is dreamlike awareness. With these imagery techniques we're



developing both the compassion aspect and the wisdom aspect, or openness and clear awareness.

Why should we adopt these techniques, so full of exotic imagery? We're already being bombarded with imagery, all day every day. Take advertising. Ads are constantly coming at us, telling us that we're not enough and we don't have enough -- but we will if only we get this or do that. These ads are always there, 24/7, in this crazy world of the twenty-first century. Here we are doing something dramatically different with visualization: we are imagining ourselves as already content, perfectly content, with perfect resources, living in abundance, right now. This type of visualization is very powerful. It acts as a homeopathic wall, as insulation from that external reinforcement. With this practice, we carry our own advertisement, in our minds. And it goes something like this: "You got the potential, just stop and tap into it." These practices actually have the power to insulate our minds from the bombardment of advertisement, most of which is not even targeted to actually make us content, just to spend. They are not just some ordinary self-help or self-improvement techniques; they go much deeper. Imagery helps us to re-wire ourselves, to tamper directly with the biochemical pathways that make up our nervous system. We'll go into that more deeply in the fourth year of this program. We're on the way there.

Modern neuroscience tells us that we can re-sculpt our nervous system. This ability has been measured to some extent in the lab, by Richie Davidson

and Matthieu Ricard. But actually we're all doing this everyday -- our brains develop according to where we focus our minds. If enough cells fire together, they wire together, so if there is enough traffic over a set of neurons, the neurons develop what are called dendritic connections. These are microfilaments that develop when memories are formed; and when memories are lost, they are pruned. A colleague of mine at Cornell has shown with radio isotopes that when rats sleep, their their cells are pruned. It's about use-it-or-lose-it: whatever we use repeatedly is what lasts, and if we use our traumatic memories and stress chemistry, then that is what our nervous systems become. We have the power to transform that, and the tools we are developing here allow us to do that more quickly. Similar tools are used for trauma and cancer patients to reach into the unconscious and speak to the older parts of the brain, where emotional memories are stored.

So, going back to mentor bonding, as we saw earlier, there are seven steps in this process. In essence they are, first, we admire what we want to be; second, we welcome what we admire into our lives and nervous systems; third, we disclose and confront our weaknesses and resolve to change them; fourth, we identify with, and vicariously enjoy, the qualities that we want to emulate; fifth, we ask for help in developing those qualities; sixth, we ask for constancy, and for ongoing, open-ended help; and seventh, we dedicate ourselves to remain strong. Then comes affirmation. We're social animals, and when someone else affirms us, we start to get empowered. We're not just in a

meditation cell trying to become buddhas, now we have a buddha coach, we have an example, a role model, we're in good company. And this is exactly how we are wired to grow and develop, through identifying with another person, and imitating that person, using that person as a guide.

Once we have the guide, how do we actually transform our life story? Once I have a glimpse at my potential, how do I work that potential into my life story so that I actually see my reality in a much more affirmative way?

That process has eight points. We'll go over the first three today, the preliminaries: *pure motivation*, *pure wisdom*, and *perfect security*. These three interdigitate with the seven steps of the process. Pure motivation overlaps with the first four steps of admiring, welcoming, disclosing and enjoying; pure wisdom and perfect security come before the fifth step of asking for help.

*Pure motivation* is having a wish to find a better, more positive way to be, through the relationship of another person. It is about letting go of shame; it is allowing ourselves to become like our role models, and to help others do the same. We develop trust in the practice so that we can be the calm person in the rocky boat, for ourselves and others. Pure motivation can be supported with the affirmation "*I am the natural purity of all things.*" With this affirmation we reflect on the fact that we are not separate, that we are part of this universe, all of us, naturally; and that this universe is a good place for all of us to be, that it can be free, purified from all the confusion we have accumulated throughout our evolution and our lifetimes. With this type of affirmation we tap into our most

positive motivation, towards us and others, like when our mothers told us that we were perfect. Actually, we are aligned toward caring for others, that's our nature -- and in this tradition that's a truism.

A friend of mine, Diane Fosha, works with trauma survivors. She asks them to focus on their most positive experiences, their moments of most wellbeing, happiness, love, compassion, awe and other positive affects. The point is that positive affects can be transformative. When people are in those states they are much more capable of letting go of the trauma. On the other hand, as long as they're in trauma, they're holding on for dear life and their whole nervous system is engaged in that fight. Very little change and learning are possible. So what we need to do at this point is to shift our motivation in a way that opens up our positive emotional channel. And neurochemicals are involved here.

Barbara Fredrickson, who is a widely recognized researcher on positive affect, says that positivity is expansive, it opens us, like a yoga pose. These positive emotions aren't just nice, they are the best state to be in for tapping into our learning potential. Good teachers know this. Feeling peaceful and open is the best for learning. We're designed to learn most when our mothers are holding us and stroking us. This is also what Mark Rosenzweig, a psychological researcher, found out a while after he brought home from the lab a few rats and gave them to his daughter. Some of you may remember this story. His daughter cared for the lab rats at home, petting them and being loving to them. And those rats developed bigger brains than the rats that stayed

in the lab, where there was no one petting them or caring for them in any loving way. It was then that Rosenzweig came up with the theory of enriched environments.

*Pure wisdom* is about understanding that the reality we live is a reality we have constructed for ourselves. It isn't reality as we think it is, as objective, or a given. We can change our reality in different ways, with different tools. Here I like to refer to Western science, to the work of narrative therapists Michael White and David Epston, and others, who were riffing on the sociology of the 1960s; and to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, authors of "The Social Construction of Reality" published in 1966, who, influenced by the linguistics revolution, were among those who understood that language is a set of signs and symbols that allow us to construct our perception of reality. In the 1960s more people began to realize that language constructed reality, and so it constructed reality differently in societies with different languages. The same idea was then applied at the individual level: my language builds my reality, my personal reality. And so narrative therapy was born, based on the idea that through rewriting our story, the story that we tell ourselves about who we are, we can actually reconstruct our experience of ourselves and the way we perceive reality. People who took on these ideas adopted Berger and Luckmann's definition of reification -- that is, what happens when we human beings make something and then forget that we made it and take it as given, like the self, the limited self we tell ourselves that we are. We have the mental flexibility to open our minds and purge these

reifications, these strong feelings that "this is me, this is who I am, and this is where I'm going." Because once we buy into that no learning is possible, we're stuck in our drama, whatever it is.

So can I make up my own concept of myself, my own self-image? One thing the Buddha knew is that we don't come into this life with one, we are not born with one. The process of making a self doesn't come until the fourth link of the cycle of dependent origination, Buddhists say. We come into the world without a self-image but we make one for ourselves, and then we identify with it, and it takes hold of our system, it becomes calcified into our system -- and that image becomes us. But we forget we made that self in the first place. The wisdom that we need is some type of mental acid to expose and dissolve the reifications. In the 1960s people dropped acid so they could see that, "hey, man, it's all a dream." Now we have these meditations to do that, to recognize the dream for what it is. With meditation we tap into our system and shift neurotransmitters -- and they are a lot more accurate than drugs.

We can use certain types of analytic awareness to expose these constructs. First comes the general insight that the world is wide open, not what we take it to be, or as fixed as we take it to be. We can look at a cup and determine how it was made, by whom, from what materials and so forth. But when we put the cup under rigorous analysis, when we break it down into the materials and processes it took to make, is it still a cup? And if it breaks is it still a cup? If we piece the shards back together? If we ask a quantum physicist, he

would say that the cup is mostly space, atoms are mostly space, so the cup is at least 99 percent space.

We can develop pure wisdom with the affirmation "*I have a self whose nature is the diamond intuition of emptiness*" -- or you can say "openness" instead of emptiness. So, the intuition of openness, could that be a self? This point of view, which is a very progressive social point of view, was invented fifteen centuries ago in Indian Buddhist culture. According to this view a person is a designation. That is actually the definition of a person in the most profound school of Buddhist philosophy. The individual is a social convention, a designation, a linguistic convention made in dependence of living systems and processes. I have a mind and body, and if I have a trauma and forget who I am, I have to learn all over again. My being Joe is dependent on the story that I have made up for Joe, that I made it up with my parents, who named me Joe. I remember growing up with them, I remember feelings about the way they looked at me, and so forth. But all that is just a story. Then I go through some sudden life-changing event, like a near-death experience, and I come out on the other side, thinking to myself "Oh, that's not who I thought I was." We have to understand that we are who we say we are, ultimately. We can change our names, our religions, our sexes. The fact is that we can have identity crises only because we have no fixed identity, the only identity we have is the one we choose to have. Even if this identity is given to us by our culture, it becomes our identity only because we choose it.

So, the statement "I have a self" might seem un-Buddhist, until you find out what this self is. The affirmation says that the self is "*the diamond intuition of emptiness.*" Diamond here means blissful, as in how it feels within the nervous system, what the chemistry of the internal reward system is. Bliss is the most powerful motivator there is. That's why we have addictions and heroism, because endorphins and dopamine, which are the feel-good chemicals that bring bliss, operate in those cases. We need to learn how to control our bliss system, and focus it on radical openness. Then we will enjoy being free and open to everything, to disarming those negative afflictions that put us in boxes, all the way. "This is the new me, totally open, selfless, me-less." And that's much nicer than being me -- at least it's much freer. When we make that new self out of radical openness, that openness empowers us to become wisdom, to be wisdom, not just to have wisdom. Deleuze and Guattari call this a "conceptual person," a person who invented himself, who is self-conscious.

*Perfect security* is rooted in the first two points, *pure motivation*, which is compassion, and *pure wisdom*. You need perfect security because you are going into the depths of your nervous system to tap into your innermost bliss. You need to know, to be sure that there is no reason to stay armed and ready for trauma. One tool that is used to establish security is the mandala. A mandala is a sphere of positivity that surrounds an exceptional being; it is a personal sphere of influence, like a parent creates for a child. A child needs someone to keep him alive; as a parent, no one gets in the space of "my



baby." And in this practice I am safe in the presence of my mentor, that special being who understands what is good for me, even if I don't. I have utmost confidence in that person. In the therapeutic process, the bond between therapist and patient creates the security like the one in the parent-child bond. This is how psychotherapy works, because the positive attentiveness of another who is wise and caring gives us the sense of security. And so we can open up and look at who we are. The mandala binds the commitment, the confidential bond with the teacher, the mentor. The important point is that our teacher has the wisdom and compassion that we wish to emulate. In the presence of these qualities we can develop our own, our own wisdom and compassion. That strong connection to the teacher is what makes us secure, *perfectly secure*. New research on primary caregiver attachment shows that truly secure bonds help us flourish, and less secure bonds diminish our capacity to develop. With that secure bond, grounded on a realistic relationship with a wise parent, one that is not just toughness but caring also, perfect security is achieved.

Another way we can create a safe space, a firewall so-to-speak, is by practicing White Tara. Using visualization we place six shells around us; and in between those shells there are lotus networks. The shells represent compassion and the lotuses represent wisdom. The six shells create force fields that act like shields against negativity; they filter out the six poisonous triggers from the social world, or *kleshas* in sanskrit: anger, ignorance, attachment, pride, doubt and

delusion. The lotus networks have razor-sharp edges; if any negativity does get through the force field, these sharp edges zap it out of existence.

Mandalas come in many different forms. Some mandalas have not-so-pleasant firewalls around the central palace, like a rim of fire, which here represents wisdom; and within the firewall there is a ring of vajras representing the control of the bliss system. Vajras are like diamonds, and they represent unshakeable mind power that is also bliss. The fire stands for the wisdom that makes compassion useful. It is wisdom that recycles our inner garbage, it separates what we should keep from what we should let go, it burns our waste and transforms it.

When we do the advanced practices, we always visualize the world around us from a safe, protected space. After we generate positive motivation, we purify the world and identify with the purity that is present in all things within this sacred space. And, with the mentor's presence, we develop the wisdom that allows us to see through and dissolve the false appearances, the doubt, the traumatic experiences. Then we put up the firewall, the security fence, and that security fence reminds us that through the power of our working together with the mentor, as a team, we create a force field of positivity. That force field is loving, compassionate motivation and commitment, together with unbridled, immaculate, untainted wisdom, wisdom that is free of bias, confusion and subjectivity.

In some practices we can imagine the protective firewall as a big perimeter fence, with heavy dudes guarding it if you want to, if it makes you feel safer. On the other side of the fence is the real world, where people are getting sick, dying, with their corpses decaying and being eaten by scavengers. And so we watch all that going on, from the other side of the fence, from the safe space. What that does is to replay the notion that, on a basic psychobiological level, there are only two factors standing between us and the wild, between us as social mammals or as wild beings. One is teamwork: having empathy and collaborating with each other. The other is culture: with culture there is innovation, there is creativity for making tools, for learning and teaching all sorts of things. So that's our safety fence, made of teamwork and culture. These are truly powerful forces. In fact, it is because of those two forces that we are the real danger on the planet, a threat to others. But we humans can relax, we have survived, we've made it, all the way to the top of the food chain. And the way we've done that is endangering everything else. When will we stop running and doing so much damage? When we can feel safer, when we see that we don't need to fight for survival, when we find a way to reproduce radical security and positivity. And that's what this tradition does, in a very sophisticated and subtle way.

## Chapter Eleven

### The First Node: Turning the Trauma of Death into Near-Death Awakening

So first of all, we do death. My wife Geri told me that our dear friend and yoga faculty member, Mary Reilly-Nichols, says to her class: "Today we are going to talk about death, so if anybody wants to leave, leave now." Actually, there is nothing more liberating than death. We spend so much of our time, consciously or unconsciously, fearing our death, and arming ourselves against death; yet we are dying all the time, that's the Buddhist point of view. We think we are always living; but we are spending a fair amount of that time dying, talking and thinking about it, and being afraid of it. This fear may be totally natural and understandable, but it isn't necessary. And it isn't pleasant or helpful. So, what is it, death? Today we are going to talk about how to practice conscious dying; and we will learn how to desensitize ourselves to death as the ultimate and uncontrollable threat. We ask ourselves, "Am I going to lose my body, am I going to lose my connection to my whole life and body processes?" Today we are going to try to get a little taste of all that. This part of the practice is very important. In fact, meditating on death is one of the main reasons why tantric practice can speed up the transformation process. And that is because of the mental flexibility, or plasticity, that it can generate.

But before we get into death I want to do a little reorientation. I want to go over the meditative experience of envisioning another person. One of you

asked me if, while envisioning an encounter with somebody else, it feels like you are actually having an encounter with your alter ego, or any other part of yourself. I think that this is a really astute way to think about it. It is part of yourself, obviously, because you are the creator of the mental image. From this point of view, if it is just a mental image it would be the mirror of your own mind, like one moment of your mind counseling another moment of your mind, or one part of your mind counseling another part of your mind, which is possible to do. And it is not crazy. If we were not able to do that we could never learn from therapy, or take in wisdom from another, or anything of the sort. The fact is that we do have different parts in our mind, and some parts are more or less wise, more or less capable. There is nothing wrong with setting up a little psycho-drama, in our own minds, between conflicting parts of ourselves, and then call on our inner wisdom, invoke our wisdom part, in a sort of self-hypnotic way.

This is a very helpful practice to see through our ordinary perceptions and conceptions. There are other very important factors that make this practice different from what crazy or delusional people do when they are speaking to themselves. One is that the imagery that you are using in this case has been around for hundreds of years, that is if you are following the traditional script. If you are meditating following the traditional script, as it was given by a teacher in a public setting of some kind, to a group of participants, then you are involved in a practice that goes back hundreds or maybe more years than that.

In that sense, you are dealing with something public and generic that is bigger than any one of us individually.

The other element that distinguishes this type of practice is that, as I always ask you in the introductory meditation, it requires that you bring together the image of a Buddha, or of your ideal, with the image of a real person, a person who truly inspires you. This gives you two sources of inspiration that are of the same spirit, or personality, or essence. If we learn to do this right, if we establish that kind of relationship, this practice can really feel like we are having a therapy session with a Buddha.

This type of practice works easily for some people, people with minds that are more receptive to these things. It is harder for people who are more pragmatic and practical, people with an imagination that works well, but mostly in normal mode only. They can imagine the normal world, but not the paranormal or the extraordinary.

If you do this practice, and you do it not alone but connected with others who are important as guides, or companions, or models, or for running reality checks, then you will have an experience of really feeling that other person is in meditation with you. And that is a really groovy experience. Wouldn't it be nice to sit with the Dalai Lama in this way? In reality we are not going to get much time with the Dalai Lama. But you could cultivate a vivid experiential sense of the Dalai Lama's presence, or the presence of any other person that inspires you, using your imagination. That is actually very similar to how we dream. But

when we dream but we don't know that we are dreaming. The other person is there, in our dream. There may be some confusion, some blurring between the physical world and the dream; I may not be sure if it is part of me or if it is me. The other person certainly feels like another person; and it could be. In some of our dreams it really feels like we are there, in the dream, in company, having lunch -- or a fight, or a wonderful time, whatever it may be -- with somebody else.

We know that the mind is capable of generating vivid, convincing experiences that are not actually happening in the physical world. They are happening only in our brains and in our emotional lives. Here we are touching something that is very important in this tradition, and that is the recognition that we can actually use this ability we all have, to vividly imagine scenes that are not happening in the physical world. But instead of letting our imagination push us around, or controlling of our imagination only now and then, willy-nilly kind-of-thing, we can actually take fuller control over our imagination and put it to good use. So you shouldn't feel that if you are talking to yourself there's something wrong with you, as long as it's a good conversation. If it is a good conversation, a useful conversation, great! If it is uplifting, great! That is the idea of a congenial relationship, that the other person isn't that different from you. By envisioning your teacher in the same form you are envisioning yourself, you are visually representing the fact that both of you buy into certain ideals. You both believe in the genius of all living beings; you both believe in the importance that

we *all* cultivate our natural genius, our natural potential. In short, what you are doing in this practice is you are visually telling yourself, "I am going to filter out all the insignificant details, and keep them out, while I have this encounter with my mentor, this conversation; it is really about the two of us, as we are both trying to embody our natural genius." And that is what you are sort of telling your unconscious mind when you do these kinds of meditation practices. So, if you are interested, dive right in.

I know for some of you who are here for the first time all this material we just went through may seem like a whole lot. So let me do a short orientation here, we don't want to lose anybody. Basically, this is an unusual kind of practice. A more common practice for building a foundation for contemplative living, or peaceful living, involves letting go and just being mindful. And that letting go, that renunciation, is one of the preliminaries of this practice. We had a little taste of that in our opening meditation, when I guided you to imagine letting go of the sense of the world as you perceive it. That is a kind of renunciation. We let go of our clinging to the world that we are used to experience, and we accept that it actually is so much bigger and so much more complex than any image that we could possibly make of it. Accepting that is the first foundation of any kind of real dharma practice, or of any powerful spiritual or contemplative practice. We need to recognize that, actually, the world isn't necessarily the way we perceive it to be; and it does not have to be as overwhelming or scary or triggering as we perceive it to be. So



work on letting go of that part of you that acts based on stress, that part of the mind that usually clings to the threatening feeling of “Oh yes, I can see it coming at me, like a saber-toothed tiger, charging at me, right now ...” Letting go of that sense of threat is not easy. We don’t want to let go of it, partly because of how our stress response works. And so our awareness takes off, and moves from a wider perspective into a much narrower one, driven by our sense of challenge, and we feel threatened.

And so renunciation is the first preliminary in this practice. We talked about renunciation during the first year of this program. And we are revisiting now. The second preliminary is recognizing our connectedness to all living beings. That was the focus of the second year of this program. Whereas renunciation, or letting go of violence and stress, is based on mindfulness practice, developing a better connection, a healthy connection with the world, is based on compassionate practice, compassionate openness. This can be cultivated through a kind of practice called *mind clearing*, or *mind training* -- *lojong* in Tibetan.

Now we are discussing the third year of the program. This year the focus is on methods for developing the power of our imagination. We do that because imagination helps us to speed up our development, to rev up our ability to achieve radical openness of mind and develop our full potential for embodying compassion, for being kind and skillful in our dealings with others. In the opening meditation we went through those elements, when we were going through the

stages of dissolution into the radical openness of mind, the pure essence of our minds -- in short, "the stuff our dreams are made on," right? That is our radical openness. Out of it we build a new way of being. "And so the sun arose and I invited my guide, my mentor, and we then transformed ourselves in the mirror of our relationship." This is about imagining, about using the imagination for rehearsing the process of transforming our mind into a radically open and clear mind, and then using that mind to reboot our nervous system and our way of being in the human body, so that we really feel connected in a positive way to our life and all its challenges, to all the living beings around us, and to the world around us.

Some people ask me about which of all these practices you should do, and how compatible they are. And the answer is they are all compatible. The Tibetan tradition follows a gradual path, and we accumulate practices along this path. At the Nalanda Institute we cover the whole gradual path. This involves developing a sort of toolbox, with multiple tools for contemplative living. The tools include mindfulness and loving-kindness, as well as a number of more specialized tools that build on these two and really rev up the power of loving-kindness, like the mind training practices and the visualization practices. Sometimes it may feel like practices of this kind, which come from different traditions, may clash with each other. There are two ways to look at that. One, from a Tantric point of view, the practice doesn't exclude anything. As a general comment, tantric practice, which is covered in the third year of this

program, combines the practices of the first and second years. This is a combination of meditation practice without form, like radical openness, with compassion meditation practices that use forms, like loving-kindness. Compassion does not work in the abstract. When you do compassion meditation you are usually thinking about specific living beings and trying to respond to them in a gentler and more skillful way. It is good to have a human body, because then we have a body to practice that kind of embodied intelligence, the emotional intelligence of compassion.

When you practice basic mindfulness, what you are trying to do is get to that primal clear mind that can perceive all things freshly. That is wisdom, that is where insight meditation, or *vipassana*, takes you, ultimately, to the experience of our true nature, which is selflessness, radical openness. We covered that in the first year. Then comes the compassionate part of the practice, which we covered in the second year. In the third year we continue to cultivate the same two qualities, wisdom and compassion, only now we are doing it using our imagination and envisioning ourselves in the way we aspire to be.

Visualization has been used by different traditions for spiritual development. In the Tibetan tradition alone there are hundreds of different visualization practices. Then there are the Hindu practices, several hundreds of them, maybe thousands. There are also Sikh and other traditions with this type of practice. The Taoist tradition is similar in some ways ... All this can become a big eclectic mishmash in which everybody practices but no one knows which end is

up. And if you don't understand the principles you may get hung up on the details, of which there are plenty.

This particular kind practice is really an improvisational art. Like music, you learn by doing the scales. There are minor scales and major scales; and there is this mode and that mode; you learn them all. But what is important here is to learn how to train your mind. Whether you are envisioning three chakras or seven chakras or five chakras, green here and blue there, is not the important part. That would presuppose that what you are envisioning is somehow more real than what you see ordinarily when you look in the mirror. It isn't. What makes the visualizations that we are practicing useful is precisely the fact that we understand that they are transparent. And so we don't take them so seriously; they're like play, a bit of make-believe. Remember, our purpose here, what we are trying to do at this point, is create a life simulator and use it for increasing our freedom of mind.

We need to realize that the way we normally see ourselves and other people is only one narrow, little, calcified rod in our imagination, a rod we go back to, over and over again, like going back to see a rerun of the same movie, "Oh, here I am again, with these people who feel just like my mom or my dad, or my uncle, or my boyfriend, or my girlfriend, or whoever hurt me, abandoned me ..." And we just can't get out of there. That's trauma. We are repeating the same scenes, having flashbacks about the same thing. The purpose of this kind of practice is to change that, and to get to the point where we can imagine

ourselves and the people around us beautifully. The goal is not to get to one slightly better rod, but to get out of the rod entirely, to understand that our imagination is part of our natural flow, of engaging with the world, of processing input and responding to it, in a way that, ultimately, we are able to go with the flow, responding in a positive way, always. So, if someone we're with needs to be peaceful, we can be a peaceful deity. If someone needs strength to be firm, we can be a firm, fierce deity for them. If someone needs us to be male, we can be male. If someone needs us to be female, we can be female. And so on. If we free our minds, we can discover our enormous flexibility, in mind and body. We find an enormous range of capacities that we don't use normally, that we don't tap into because we are governed by this one rigid self-construct, this one rigid story about what this life is and where we come from, where we are now, where we are going, and what everybody else with a role in our life movie is doing.

Someone asked me if the dissolution process we go through when we meditate on death takes us to the radically open mind, to experience what Western tradition calls a mystical state, or what contemplative scientific theory calls a bliss state, or flow state, a state of total openness and spontaneity. I would say yes, that is one purpose, to help us actually stretch out of the narrow bounds that we assign to our experience. Open your experience. If you don't, it's like singing only one note out of so many, all the time, the same note, over and over again, while the reality is that our minds and bodies have a huge range of experience. But we think it's not us, we don't identify with it, we're stuck in

believing it's just one note. Here we are trying to realize our whole spectrum, because actually we can be the whole orchestra, we are the whole orchestra of experience. The process of the eight dissolutions leads into openness that is spacious and formless. In a way it's like standing on your head in yoga, in the sense of doing the opposite of what you normally do. We normally get very hooked on certain identities, like this is who I am, this is what I believe in, this is where I live, this is where I work, this is what I do, this is what I am trying to do, this is who I love, this is who I hate. That is how we fill our life with content, content that gets calcified and stuck, like fat clogging the arteries, like coronary artery disease, of the mind or spirit.

What we are trying to do here is take all that hard stuff out, from its roots. Like standing on your head, formless experience normally makes us uncomfortable, we are not comfortable with just floating around. Why? Because if you are floating around you do not know where your body is, and you do not know what might come and bite you from wherever. If you envision yourself having a body, you know what to defend; but if you are floating in open space what are you going to defend? We don't feel safe identifying with all those differentiated states, because, fundamentally, we don't feel safe in the first place. Realizing this is part of the desensitization process; it is teaching our subliminal, subconscious mind about our nervous system, and about the little cat and mouse and frog and other stuff in our nervous system that makes us violent

in reaction to feeling threatened; and it shows us that we're actually safe, we have survived the struggle for survival, and so we can disarm now.

My first analyst, Rolf, who was Norwegian, and a remarkable man, loved imagery. And he used guided imagery in therapy, like they do in California. The therapist guides the patient to go to the park, or the mountainside, wherever, to make the patient feel safe. This is very helpful, lovely stuff. Rolf talked about the dynamic between differentiated states and undifferentiated states, what spiritual traditions call form and formlessness. Our minds produce both types of states. I mentioned earlier a couple of poetic jingles that remind me of this capacity we all have, and they are very helpful. I mention them often. One is from Shakespeare's *Tempest*, "Life is such stuff as dreams are made on ..."  
Dreams are made of form, and symbols, but they are not real, they are mental constructions, sort of fluid and ephemeral. The quote goes on, "... and our little life is rounded with a sleep,." When we sleep without dreaming, we are in a formless state, we are rounding our lives by consciously putting ourselves to sleep, we are dissolving mentally into a formless state. We will talk a little bit more about the science of form and formless states, in the context of this tradition.

The second quote is from Joni Mitchell; she says at the end of one of her songs, "We are stardust, we are billion-year-old carbon, we are golden, caught in the devil's bargain, and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden."  
When you meditate, when you think of yourself as stardust, you are sort of emphasizing formlessness, the formless nature of everything, and everyone, and

our total interconnectedness. We are all made of the same kind of atoms, the same big-bang quantum soup. Isn't that mind-blowing? And wouldn't it be nice to take all that stardust and make it in the form of a garden, where there is always growth, where there is always something beautiful growing? That is part of what we are doing here. In a way, you can say that we are trying to have our cake and eat it too. We are trying to be like stardust, which is formless, while being in the garden at the same time, trying to turn the world and our minds into a garden, which is form. It does not seem so easy, right? Intuitively, it seems impossible. But, from this point of view, the only way to make the world into a garden, a place where beautiful things grow, is to realize that we are stardust.

The only way to really get control of our dreams is to be comfortable with our ultimate formlessness. Dreams are ultimately an art form. They are just a narrative, a fiction that we are telling ourselves. We can learn how to control and use our dreams, to master the art of what they call in California "lucid dreaming." I mentioned that this art, this kind of practice, has eight points. And we touched on the first three last week. Today we will go over them again, and take on the next three.

The first three points are the three preliminaries of *motivation*, *wisdom* and *security*. *Motivation*, because we need to be positively motivated to do this practice effectively, safely and wisely. What is a positive motivation? It is something you can build on, and in this case it's something you can build a happy life on. When we set our minds to an experience of peace, of letting go,



of contentment, and especially when we connect with benevolence, with feelings of loving-kindness, of compassion towards others so that we are feeling good not just about ourselves but also all others, that is a sustainable engine for positive evolution, right?

To build positive motivation we need to renounce to our sense of separation, impurity, and stress that come from seeing ourselves as separate beings. Here we can use the affirmation "*I am the natural purity of all things*" -- we say it and then we dissolve into that purity.

The second point is *wisdom*. We need to understand that our tendency to seeing things as separate, unrelated, as having fixity or separateness, starting with our separate self, separate from everything else and somehow fixed in nature, is deceptive, confusing, and a kind of bondage. That is transcendent wisdom, formless wisdom, whatever you want to call it. When we look at things, including ourselves, and we look close and do a rigorous analysis of who we are, we see that we actually are made of relationships, our relationships with other beings and things. There is nothing in there, inside of me, that is not made of non-relationships, or exclusions, disconnections. We are all made of infinite connections.

The wisdom of emptiness, or the wisdom of openness, is simply recognizing that in that infinite web of connections which is "me" there is no non-related element. We are empty of non-related elements. To use the terminology of some contemplative biologists, we are totally open systems. That is the

biological definition of living things nowadays. Living things are defined as open systems nested within other open systems. There no longer is an "organism." Biologists are recognizing that everything is part of the same, sort of like quantum physics comes to biology. Biologists, probably influenced by quantum physics, are seeing life as made up of a web of interconnections.

The wisdom of emptiness is understanding that there is nothing blocking or impeding interconnection, because there is no disconnected element. If there were a disconnected element, where would it fit? How could it fit? The affirmation you can use here, the wisdom affirmation, is *"I am the self which is the diamond of intuitive emptiness."* Or, if you want to use more poetic language you can say *"I have a self whose nature is the blissful intuition of emptiness."*

The third point is *security*, or *confidence*. Here we set up a firewall around us to protect our workspace. It is like setting the alchemists' crucible, to transform base metals into gold. In this case it is about our transformation. I think people like Jung believed that it was possible to transforming the nervous system for becoming enlightened. Maybe some of them were turning metals into gold, I don't know. Some of them were really interested in chemistry and physics, not just in neurochemistry and neurophysiology. Anyhow, for them the crucible contained the relationship between the mentor and the student, and their work together, in the same way as in the context of this practice. We are creating that sacred space, that confidential space, where we can work with our

mentor, our ideal, where we work together on transforming our nervous systems. "You help me, I help you, and together we can use this technology, or this art, for transforming ourselves and becoming enlightened, together. And as we set up the safe space we remind ourselves to maintain our unconditional positive motivation and our emptiness wisdom, our ultimate openness, our radical openness. Those things together form the firewall that protects us. This is the ultimate security system, in the sense that it sets us to respond to the world outside, to the stresses and craziness of life, in the best possible way. And after we have that system set up, we can begin the actual process of transformation.

The actual process of transforming our life has three nodes, following the basic facts of life, which in the Buddhist view are, first we are born, second we develop, and third we die. But in Buddhism the cycle begins with death: We die from our past life, we develop, and then we are reborn, in this life. And then, of course, we develop and we die again. And so, wherever you slice the onion, you have the three nodes.

The first thing we need to transform is death. The first node of our story is "I am going to die." We all feel this very viscerally, and we all believe it. But we never stop to ask what is the "I" that is going to die. What exactly is going to die when I, Joe, die? We are all convinced that we are going to die, but we never ask ourselves what dies, exactly, what part is going. And we worry so much about it. So, exactly, what is going to happen to me?

We never ask ourselves what is really going to happen, how we are going to die. One of Freud's pupils studied the way in which we humans are into death denial. We live our lives as if we were never going to die. For Freud, narcissism, while part of our survival instinct, was a psychosis, a psychosis of epidemic proportions. We are all busy, really busy, going about life as if we are not going to die -- at least not for now. From the Buddhist point of view, as long as we are living in that psychosis, we cannot see the reality, the very simple fact of nature that this body is not going to last forever.

Nothing lasts forever. And, in the physical sense, yes, we are all going to die, so we better prepare for it. But we don't. And that is a reflection of the fundamental traumatic mode in which we live. If you are not thinking about the basic facts of your life in a rational way, how can you actually have a rational understanding about how to live well?

Death is part of all kinds of Buddhist practice, whether it is Theravada, or mindfulness, or any other. If you do any Buddhist practice for a length of time, the time will come when you will be asked to envision your funeral, and see your body, embalmed, or maybe burned to ashes, depending on your culture; you see the people who are coming to your funeral. And so you start to get used to the reality that your body is impermanent, and you don't get overly attached to it. This is key in Buddhism's *gradual path*, or *Lam Rim*. You start to focus on what is really important: what can I do when I have this precious body, this precious life, for a few years? The meditations are often structured following

a pattern that begins with life and how precious it is; and the only certain thing about life is death, death that could come at any time but we don't know when. This can get very depressing. It takes a million causes and conditions to maintain life but only one accident to end it; and we never know when it will end.

Meditating on death is part of the sutras and the tantras. But the Tantras have a unique way for meditating on death. Instead of thinking about it or imagining it as an event happening in the future, in your practice you are actually trying to recreate it in the moment, you are trying to go through the process of death in the present. Here you can build your simulator, or your desensitization tank, to train yourself to get used to the idea of letting go of form, letting go of the attachment to your body and letting go of the attachment to your ordinary mind, and learning how to flow through the whole process of life and death. That is the basis for Tibetan science.

The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* was one of the first Buddhist texts that was translated into English. The text talks about how to use the science and technology from the tantras to transform the death experience. This is extremely important. It talks about how we can tap into the primal mind. And, as it turns out, modern medicine and neuroscience have confirmed that Buddhists were right, that the primal mind, the mind that doesn't show up on an EEG in any way that we would call active, is actually a very functional mind, a mind that can perceive and remember. Evidence of this is found in people who have near-

death experiences, or strokes, like Jill Bolte Taylor, a neuroanatomist who became widely known after writing a book called "My Stroke Of Insight" in which she describes the process she went through when she had a stroke. As a neurologist she was able to understand what parts of her brain were shutting off.

About 10 percent of the people who are resuscitated after being technically dead, brain-dead, come back and they can remember what was going on while they were technically dead. They will say "you know I heard you talking in surgery, I heard you saying sweet things to me, and it really moved me."

Our primitive brains, our primitive nervous systems, our primitive sense of consciousness were actually sentient and capable of having a subjective experience and even perceiving things. And, as I said earlier, for people who come back from a near-death experience, their lives are totally transformed, because they experience who they are, and what life and death are, in a completely different way, a way that is actually liberating. It is totally liberating, because what these people thought was the worst thing that could possibly happen to them, death, has happened -- and it wasn't what they expected! I am not saying that it is a great ride or that these people are lining up to do death again. The point is that what they expected from death didn't happen. And why is that? Because most of the time we go through life living with a mental construct of ourselves, a mental image and an identity that we take to be ourselves, a little barcode that we assume to be "me." But a near-death

experience is an experience of that "me" being deconstructed. Afterwards people can no longer talk to themselves or see themselves in the same way. And yet something continues. That something is a primal awareness, or consciousness.

This primal awareness does not have the form of a personal self-construct. After a near-death experience people discover that they are not their self-construct, they discover that they have this totally revolutionary, totally open freedom, what in Buddhist psychology we call the *self of selflessness*. This is a natural mind, a mind that doesn't belong to you or me, it doesn't have a barcode on it, it doesn't have your birth picture on it, or your favorite picture from childhood, it doesn't have your parents' stamp on it. It is a mind that is very hard to differentiate from one person to the other. But it is still a mind, a mind that has experiences, that is experiencing things. And that is the natural form of the Buddha mind, sometimes called *the original face*, and in Dzogchen it is the natural mind. We all have it, deep down in us. We are there every time we go into deep sleep, or if we have a really great orgasm, maybe we get a little glimpse of it. But, according to Buddhism, if we are going through life feeling defensive and frightened, and always busy trying to survive, we may notice these experiences just barely, or miss them altogether, even if they are the most intense experiences, positive experiences, of love or connectedness, or whatever.

The same is said to happen when people die: we actually lose consciousness because our human consciousness is attached to our self-construct, and once the self-construct can't be maintained, we sort of go into a swoon, we lose awareness and we go through the more subtle states of consciousness without consciousness, we don't even know what's happening to us. So, of course, in that moment, we are prone to the intrusion of instinctive fears and mental patterns from all over the place. You are now at the *bardo*, what is between death and rebirth, that is according to the science of tantra. I am using science in the Tibetan sense, which means mind science. It is not neuroscience, although there is neuroscience in it. What we're talking about is a soft, experiential, contemplative science.

According to that contemplative science, there is a process of dissolution from ordinary waking state into the death state, what Buddhists call the clear light state, that happens in eight stages. I am sorry that I am giving you so many numbers and so many sets in everything we're going through. Don't worry about it; at this stage it may go in one ear and out the other, but it still gives you a flavor, a taste. And if you get a flavor, then you are getting somewhere. The eight stages of dissolution are split into two parts, physical and mental. I tried to lead you through them in today's opening meditation, to plant a seed for our conversation. According to ancient physics there are four elements, or four states of matter: solid, liquid, energies and gases, in that order diminishing the



level of coarseness. As you go through the four physical dissolutions you imagine your body dissolving.

First you imagine losing your grip on the more solid parts of your embodiment, your musculoskeletal system, your physical system. Your sense of solidity melts into your sensory system, and more specifically into your physical fluidity, the bodily fluids within you. Other things happen at this stage: you lose your normal capacity for vision, and you develop a sense, an internal experience, that everything is like a mirage, like a daydream. You start to slip into a daydream and things start to feel very fuzzy; many images are coming up in your mind.

Next, the fluids, the bodily fluids, along with the sensory system, melts into bodily heat, and the conceptual system. Bodily heat, our metabolism, is what sustains our life, what keeps us alive on a physical level and on a pure energy level. When we lose our body fluids we lose our senses of hearing and sensation, which support the physical body's capacity for pain and pleasure. Our mucous membranes become dehydrated. At this point we experience things as cloudy, or smoky, like a thick black smoke; things seem more whirly and swirly than just mirage-like.

Next, heat dissolves into gas, into the breath gases. And as heat dissolves so does the emotional system that is connected to them. At this point we lose our sense of smell, and our ability to recall names. Our temperature goes down and we experience all things as having the appearance of sparks, or pixels, a

bunch of them, like bunches of little lights. They appear and disappear, they melt before our eyes.

Finally, the gases, the breath gases, and the emotional system that comes with it, melt into space, or consciousness. Buddhists consider space as one of the basic physical elements; there is space in our minds and bodies. At this stage we lose our sense of taste, and touch, and imagery, we lose our executive capacity, our planning capacity. This is a sign that our cortex is shutting down, somehow. Our breath decreases, and we experience something like a still candle burning. Our mind becomes a lot less cluttered, and more undifferentiated. By now the physical body has dissolved. We have melted down, sort of, from the coarse body made of the coarse physical elements to a body that is made of mind and energy -- subtle energy, you can think of it in that way, which is what our nervous system and our innermost mind are made of.

The mental dissolutions come next. The coarse mind, along with the energy that supports it, melt in the so-called *subtle mind*. Let's not go into what that means for the time being, let's just say that the mind itself is starting to go into a deeper, and more primal, core place. It is going from a more differentiated mental life to a much simpler mental life.

In the next dissolution we lose the set of patterns related to positive and negative attachments, or clinging, like love and desire. There are 33 patterns related to attachment. As we lose these patterns we experience a kind of

cooling, luminous, peaceful calm, with an appearance of an autumn sky pervaded by moonlight. That is a nice image, right? It sounds good.

The next layer of instinctive patterns we lose are the aggressive patterns, both positive and negative aggressions, both assertiveness and violence. There are 40 different patterns of aggressiveness. And when they dissolve, when they go offline, we have an experience of warmth, melting warmth. This experience is described as having the appearance of an autumn sky pervaded by twilight, like sunrise, like a brilliance, a very warm brilliance.

Then we go to the third layer of the mind. At this point we lose our drive to experience ourselves as separate, as alienated, as "other" or "me," -- me against the universe. There are only seven patterns at this level. Here it is said to be profoundly peaceful and stilling. Western mystics used to call this state the Dark Night of the Soul, because it is like becoming unconscious, probably because you are going through what I would call a primal vagal discharge, and you can faint. But you don't want to be unconscious, you have to stay clear through it, try to stay aware through it, through the Dark Night. The appearance here is described as an autumn sky pervaded by midnight.

And then, finally after that dissolves, we go into this *extremely subtle mind*. At this level the mind is functioning in its purest and most natural state, free from the drives of desire and acquisitiveness, aggression, offensiveness, isolation, self-referentiality, confusion, and so on. The appearance here is like the predawn sky. You know what that is like if you wake up really early, just before dawn.

There is light in the sky, but it is not day yet, and it is not night. It is the light of neither day nor night. That is what practitioners are trying to get at, to attain a clarity of mind that isn't biased or tainted by any of the normal drives that color our reactive, survival-oriented mind. This stage is called the clear light of death, or the clear light of bliss.

According to Buddhism, we can get to the stage of clear light of bliss in our meditations. We can do this dissolution process in our meditation; and that is a blissful experience. Out of that practice we develop radical freedom to reboot our self-concept and our neural systems. And we can selectively recruit -- to use the Western biological term -- only positive emotions and perceptions we want for our new self and life. So, how about that, I can now remake a self that is made of lucid intuition, shamelessness, fearlessness, wishlessness, and so on, a self totally made of positive perceptions and emotions. That is pretty far out, right?

Normally, when you are beginning this meditation practice you don't go into this level of detail. I am sharing it with you to give you a feel for the power of this practice. It is an interesting practice, one that feels somehow a lot more granular than just melting into space. You could just have a fantasy where you melt into space, and that could be something. But that is not what we're talking about here. If you go through a process like this you might actually get a feeling, a taste, of what dying might be like.

You can take any transition from a differentiated state of mind to an undifferentiated state of mind as an opportunity to practice your death transformation. What this means is that you can practice the death meditation when you are going to sleep, or in sexual experience, or if you have a near-death experience. And when you do that, when you practice in this way, you are killing normal death, gradually. Once you do the experiment, once you eliminate your concept of yourself in terms of your normal body image, you eliminate your normal emotional and conceptual sense of yourself -- the self as attached to this, or worried about that, or angry at them, of whatever is getting to you -- then you are on the path that will ultimately get you to a state of consciousness in which your self-concept and your self-image are no longer up and running. And yet you are not unconscious. You've done away of all that negativity and you still here, somehow ...

Having this experience shows you that what you thought death was -- losing your ordinary body and your ordinary mind -- doesn't actually kill you! There is still something there, some residue.

This is a very interesting practice, and it is very liberating, once you realize that your awareness can go down to a very subtle level, a level that you didn't know it was in you, or a level you didn't know was you. And with that you have a way to be prepared, for other states, and for the death experience. In a way, you are not thinking about death and expecting it as the worst thing that is going to happen -- and it could actually be blissful. In fact, that happens

automatically, instinctively, for some people. But other people don't have such a great ride. From the Buddhist point view, it is always good to prepare for death, to practice the death experience. You can't count on your unconscious, or a god, to do this for you. Training will prepare you for a good and blissful death experience. So use the flight simulator, or your death simulator, and practice, so that when death comes you will be trained, you will be ready, you will know what to do.

You can use this practice as a kind of trauma therapy or phobia therapy. But you'd have to feel very secure about it, which requires a certain amount of confidence, and a lot of practice. For most people, it will probably be a long process to get there. Still, I have seen people who follow this kind of practice and have reached significant transformation, people who have gone through the healing process that they did not get after many years of therapy. Sometimes, what people can't change in 20 years of psychoanalysis, they can change in a few years doing this kind of practice.

One thing you are doing here is you are purging your mind and your nervous system of all your traumatic memories. You are letting go of them, all of them, because they are attached to your defensive patterns, and your acquisitive patterns, and your aggressive patterns -- all patterns that you are letting go. They may come up again. But your response will be different. For now, begin by building the firewall, the firewall made of your practice and your relationship with your mentor; and feel safe within it. You are safe within your

own body. Then you do this practice, the practice of the eight dissolutions, you dissolve yourself as you perceive it, and then you create yourself as a deity, the deity of your choice. And then you dissolve yourself again. In this way you start to feel more confident. And you want to be as confident as possible, and as connected to your guide as possible. Bob Thurman has a lovely way to describe the transformative power of this practice. As we know, people who go through a near-death experience find themselves transformed by it, by just that one experience. So, imagine how transformative it would be to go through a near-death experience every day, and even six times a day ... How quickly your psyche and your nervous system could be transformed! I don't think there is a more powerful practice for transforming your mind among all the practices that I have run into. It is really a very powerful practice.

Another interesting biological metaphor here is a particular subtype of temporal lobe epilepsy. This is a form of epilepsy that does not cause seizures, but you might smell something, or you might space out for a minute, what some people call an absence seizure. Or you might have a euphoric episode, for just a moment, you get blissed out. It is often called Dostoyevsky's epilepsy because Dostoyevsky suffered from it. Overtime, people who have this become happier. So many people, including psychiatrists, are interested in declassifying this condition as a disease, because if it makes you happier, is it really such a bad thing? Is it really a disease, like dis-ease?

In the next two weeks we will talk about what comes after you dissolve. And that is how to go about rebuilding, recreating yourself. We will talk about how to master the art of developing a new mind, and a new personality, and a new nervous system, and, ultimately, how to master the art of manifestation, of manifesting a life, a life that really embodies the freedom and the positive energy and chemistry of this kind of dissolution process, this kind of release, which is a very deep-seated release. This is about dissolving, or dismantling, the normal self-protective armament that's locking up our nervous system. And the software for that, the software we need to delete, is our perception of ourselves as living in a struggle for survival against the world around us. We dismantle that software as we persuade ourselves that it's safe, that we are safe, we are not separate from the world, we are not in a struggle for survival against the world. And the proof of that is that we have survived, already. And now it's time to leave that behind and learn how to thrive, to triumph, and to experience the full joy and bliss of life and enlightenment.

The point is to dismantle all that negative energy and then learn to recreate yourself, and to do that by coming out of that deep reservoir with more pure positive energy and chemistry. You learn how to purify and transform that base metal, your nervous system, with the chemicals in your body, at your disposal. We can take the stress chemicals that support our negativity, and change them in a way to transform our nervous system into bliss and openness,



a nervous system that can support an enlightened being, a heroic altruist. This sounds good to me. And we are going to work at it.

According to Buddhist tradition, purging yourself of your ordinary life, your ordinary life story, is a key part in preparing for transforming your nervous system. For this we work with the chakra system. I want to make the point that, although there are many hundreds of different kinds of practices to do that, in reality they are all the same. The different deities are there to appeal to the different interests and needs of different people. You may be attracted to one kind of color, or one kind of person, one kind of face or body type, or expression or manifestation; once you are attracted you connect, you practice, you get beyond the more superficial part of the practice, and then you see how uniform it all is. You can find the same patterns in the Buddhist and Hindu tantras. Mary Reilly Nichols, who you will meet if you come to our retreats, Mary and I like to lay the Hindu tantras alongside the Buddhist Tantras, and compare them, find how they all have the same set of stages and practices. The differences are many, but they are mainly window dressing. The actual process is always a neurobiological and neuropsychological process of working with your mind and your nervous system, using content, using images, using altered states, using affirmations.

People ask if this kind of practice is comparable to shamanistic practices that use chemicals, hallucinogenic chemicals like ayahuasca, which contains DMT. In the Indic tradition, in the Vedic tradition there was some drug use,

basically psychedelic drugs. But they were replaced with meditation and yoga, at least 2,000 years ago, maybe as many as 4,000. Nowadays, the Western drug ecstasy is a popular choice. The problem with these drugs is that the effect is extremely unpredictable. It's like hitting a flower with a sledgehammer. With these drugs you are throwing a bunch of chemicals into your nervous system. You may have a good trip or a bad trip. And people have bad trips all the time. You may also feel very ill physically.

From the Buddhist point of view there are a couple of technical problems with using these substances. What will define your experience is your mindset and the social setting in which you are doing it; and if your mindset is not so good, and the social setting is not so supportive, then you can have a bad trip easily. Here we are trying to create a mindset, a more positive and supportive mindset, by re-envisioning ourselves as deities. We are creating a new setting by bonding with the teacher, the mentor, and by letting him or her guide us. Instead of getting the substance externally, we are learning how to generate it internally. The advantage of this approach is control. You are not going to flood your nervous system with a major shot of DMT, because it is unstable and unpredictable. Instead, you are going to generate what you need internally, you are going to cultivate the capacity to do so, gradually, in a way you can control. And so, ultimately, you learn to generate your own chemical mix, to bliss out and recharge, or to deconstruct your mind, or whatever you want to do. This

is like burning through the film of your life story, letting light in to burn through whatever is not helpful to you, so you can go on in freedom, and in bliss.

Another advantage of this kind of practice over drugs is that this is a much more reproducible technology, more reliable, even though not quicker. Take the time. We need time to prepare our minds and nervous systems for this kind of radical transformation if we want to do it in a truly effective and constructive way. If we force it too hard, for example with drugs, we are likely to get trauma. I am not trying to pass judgment on any traditional culture, or spiritual culture, or rite of passage. In my view, if used under skillful guidance, with the right intentions and a fully prepared student, it might be a very effective method. The Dalai Lama and I have had conversations about this. In the Buddhist view a gradual approach is important. And the key thing to keep in mind is that this is a kind of conscious trip to be taken under safe conditions for reproducible experience. You need skills for that, and you need to tap into the right resources, reliable resources. Building those skills is a slow process. But in the Buddhist view, what's the hurry?

## Chapter 12

### The Second Node: Turning Mindless Transitions into Blissful Development

We have to send some prayers and positive thoughts to the people in harm's way right now. The kind of events we see next door and around the world give us all the more reason why we need to become enlightened altruists quickly, because the planet is in big trouble, right? In addition to the school shootings that we hear about more often, there's violence, crazy violence coming from everywhere. And that is mostly because violence is inside of us. We all have it. The way to deal with that kind of insanity is not by worrying about what is happening out there, in the outside world, but in here, on my watch, inside myself, because we're all capable of horrendous things. And we work with the mind, we try to transform the way our minds work, we try really hard. And by doing that we start a ripple effect. We don't have to use anything very fancy. The process we are using here is very low tech, very non-violent. And it really works! You can see that it works in the people who do this kind of practice. They become less violent, more relaxed and trusting. But very few of us do this sort of practice.

There are seven billion people on this planet, and of these how many billions go through horrendous suffering and hardship without having a major blow-up, without resorting to violence? Very few. That is the miracle, and that is a potential we all have. We need to meditate on that, cultivate that. And if we

want to do something about the violence, if we want to help reduce it, one thing we can do is to speed our own development, to eliminate the source of our violent instincts. Then we can make a difference, out there, help reduce the violence out there.

So we are in the third year of this program on sustainable happiness, half way through the second half of it, learning about transforming our sense of self and life story. How many of you are here for the first time? Welcome. I will try to bring you up to where we are, if that is humanly possible.

In this program we are taking a somewhat unusual contemplative journey. Here we are going beyond just discouraging, or purging, our images and words and symbols that carry destructive tendencies; here we are also cultivating better, more transformative words and images and symbols. We are using our symbolic mind to create an ideal environment, a safe space inside of us for our contemplative journey, where we can practice. You can call it a monastery, or a mandala. And so we take the monastery inside ourselves, into our own minds.

Basic mindfulness developed for people who were going to be monks and nuns, people who left the life of worry and stress and rushing and so on, and entered a life in the monastery, a life based on radical non-violence, a life designed to support reflection, and contemplation, and peace. But if, on the other hand, we decide to stay in the world, we need other tools to protect our mind from the environment we live in.

We can see that our environment is one where we are at the mercy of our surroundings, totally interconnected with people who are not necessarily trying to tame their minds. They may actually want to inflame their minds, if not for destruction it may be for acquisition, and if it is not for acquisition it may be for fame, or celebrity or something of the sort. How do we stand up to that environment and feel safe, in a world in which we are interconnected, easily, through the internet, all the time, 24/7, to terrible news, to a world where we are bombarded with negative or useless information, and violent images? We can do that by bringing in the monastery, or the mandala, whatever we want to call our sacred space for transformation, the space where we can feel safe enough to disarm and tap into our humanity, our potential for boundless unconditional love, openness, and so on. We take that space into our imagination, and we carry it around with us, wherever we go. We try to filter our perceptions of the world around us, and of our self in the world, and our filter is the vision that we are already in the ideal place to transform; everything that does not help our positive transformation is eliminated. And we remind ourselves that we are not in the jungle anymore, in danger. This is Kansas.

In this practice we start with the result, we start where we want to be, ideally. And that is to be fully enlightened. So we envision ourselves as fully enlightened beings. We use our imagination to override our ordinary perceptions of the world and ourselves as frightened or alienated beings in a threatening world. Try to envision yourself as a fully competent, capable,

enlightened being, imagine yourself already at your goal, where you want to be, how you want to be. Then you start on-the-job training: we know now that we are really buddhas, we are trying to see how we are buddhas, and we're trying to recognize all other living beings in our environment as buddhas too, even if they may be temporarily confused. We are trying to open, *really* open, to a deeper level, the level of visionary perception, perception of the future, what some people call an extraordinary conventionality. We are learning to use our potential to overcome our overwhelming insane survival instincts, self-protective instincts, and traumatic childhood perceptions; and to adapt to a new way of living that is sustainable, in a sustainable civilization.

And so we are exploring this unusual Tibetan art of using our imagination as a meditative aid, with that goal in mind. At this point we are exploring two ways: one is imagining the presence of our teacher, always, in our mind's eye, right there in front of us. You don't really need to have your teacher nearby, in your compound, just a few minutes away. You can always ask him or her a question by envisioning their presence before you, in your mind's eye. You ask the question as you tap into a subtle, intuitive, deep awareness. This is similar in Western therapy. People who are in therapy with me tell me, "Joe, I had you in my head, I needed advice and I had a conversation with you, in my head." That simple technique works, and that is great. So that's one way we can bring others in.

If we tune in to this kind of practice, if we set our minds in this way, so that we can respond in more positive ways, with less violence, our transformation goes more quickly. By envisioning my mentor in front of me, and both of us in a safe space, joined by a shared commitment to becoming a better person and living in a better world, I can actually open up to a better life in a better world. The bond with the mentor makes us safe. It creates a sense of sanity, clarity and order in the middle of a world that is crazy, where most people are running around, most of the time, very confused and upset and distressed, like frightened animals, or cornered children.

Using our imagination we bring the mentor, the teacher, in front of us, and then into our hearts. This is called the yoga of mentor bonding, or role-modeling imagery. We are modeling our enlightenment from an image, a mental trace, an imprint, a memory of a real person who is more enlightened than we are. It does not have to be someone that is a whole lot more enlightened, or a buddha; just somewhat more enlightened than us is good enough. Once we can do that, we try to use the relationship with our mentor to transform our self-image, in that sacred, safe space. We envision ourselves as an ideal. For example, we can envision ourselves as the Wisdom Buddha, Sheer Brilliance. We do this as we try to override our childhood identification as a frightened, small, helpless child. The Tibetan tradition refers to this process as the purification of our ordinary perception of ourselves, and our ordinary conception of ourselves, as an ordinary being, a frightened, lonely, alienated being. We are using our



imagery to reassure our unconscious minds that we are not such vulnerable small beings, we are actually god-like buddha beings. We *do* have buddha nature within us. We just need to tune in, tune into the Buddha channel, tune into our buddha nature.

Once we have done that, once we have that new sense of self -- I call it a prosthetic self -- transplanted from our teacher, we use it to transform our life story. If you don't do that, you will remain stuck at rehearsing the same life story, of traumatized little "me" struggling to get protection and love in a lonely world, where it is me against the universe, guessing who is going to be eaten next, or who's going to win next.

So we are rewriting our life story, we are revising the basic facts and the basic narrative that is constantly filtering through our brains. Some people believe that our identity, the narrative of who we are, runs in the brain's medial prefrontal cortex. There, the ordinary human brain seems to be constantly running the film through a little loop, saying "you are Joe, ordinary Joe, you came from here, you are going there, this is where you are now, this is what you are doing; that's it." Imagine if you could replace that film with one that says "you are a buddha-in-training, you are coming out of eons of struggle for survival, you've made it to the Pure Land, to the mandala space where you have everything, where you can realize your Buddhahood, and then you can help everybody around you do the same." Imagine that as a film running

running through constantly, in your mind. You wouldn't need to go to Tibet House anymore!

So this is the training, this is what could help you give yourself that vision, and to feed yourself that vision on a regular basis. Serious practitioners go through this practice, through that ideal vision of themselves, six times a day. And it doesn't take a whole lot of time. If you practice regularly you can do it in three minutes, even two. And this resets your self-image. Within the safe space of the mandala transformation happens more quickly.

This process of revising your self-image and your narrative is a prelude to totally rewiring your nervous system, which is what we are going to be talking about next year. So that is where we are now, in this practice, in this program.

There are things we should look out for on this path; there are pitfalls, 14 of them actually. In this context, you only have to be aware and abide by a few of them, including your vows for keeping the basic principles like non-violence, non-addiction, and non-acquisitiveness. You can take these one at a time, or as many as you feel up to. What you want to avoid at this point is going to either of two extremes: On the one hand, you don't want to be too idealistic, too obsessed or too invested in the practice; and on the other you don't want to be too skeptical. Avoiding those two extremes applies to this practice and to other Buddhist teachings as well.

You don't want to be too idealistic, you don't want to make an idol of the image you are trying to generate in your meditation to guide you. You don't

want to mistake the image for the real thing, for reality, which is what a lot of people do. In the Tibetan tradition there are a lot of meditators who do this kind of practice and who get absorbed in it, so absorbed that the ritual may seem enough of a practice. I've seen people who, in the beginning, get really absorbed, intensely absorbed in the beautiful art that comes with this practice. And, truly, the art is very beautiful and absorbing. But it is important to take it with a grain of salt. Take it lightly, take it easy, don't take this practice as a new religion, or obsession. This practice is a way of preparing your mind, training your mind. And you might say that this particular aspect is related to one of the preliminaries, the preliminary of the wisdom of emptiness, because you should always remember the emptiness of the images that you are using as teachers, the emptiness of the deities that you are practicing with.

You are taking these images as models, to shape an ideal self, for the mentor and yourself. They are archetypal, they are angelic, whatever you want to call them -- and they are all imaginary. So you don't get addicted to them, you don't turn the practice into a better golden cage. As you practice a deity you remember that it is just another image in your mind, it is mentally fabricated and it is impermanent. This does not mean that it cannot be useful. It can have a use, as an artificial aid, a prosthetic aid, to help you heal while you need to heal.

You need to avoid feeling intimidated by the practice. This art is kind of exotic for us, it is different from what we have been exposed to, from what we

normally do, from what our culture encourages. In general we don't use the imagination so actively in our meditation, we don't sit down and go through a script full of prescribed images like we do in this practice. And surely we don't use the image of a real person as a model of our ideal, because that makes our minds feel vulnerable, because that is too intensely open and connected to someone else. But in this practice we do.

The other extreme is to get overly skeptical, or suspicious, or anxious about this practice, about trying it, experimenting with it. My advice is give it a try, try it on for size, put yourself into it, don't be afraid, run the experiment, it is just your mind. And if you get a little confused by it, or upset with it, you can always ask yourself, "What am I doing here? What is this all about?" It is important to be fully aware of where you are, and what your intention is, at every step along the path.

People often ask me, "Am I doing it right? I don't really see this deity in front of me." The point is to use your best sense to establish contact with your higher potential, and here you are trying to do that using your imagination. Just do the experiment and see what the experience is like. Is it a good experience? If at the end of the meditation you feel inspired, or connected to something in a special way, listen to that, tap into that, it's a way worth exploring, whatever your cultural or habitual preconception might say. Don't be afraid of your own experience, and check it out, *really* check it out.

I want to go back to what we discussed in the last chapter. We did something very far out last week. I first laid out the eight steps for transforming your narrative, your life story. If we like this practice and we get into it we may save a lot of money in psychotherapy bills, because it is a helpful practice. It helps us to get unstuck, to stop being our parent's child, or the person who was hurt in this way and that way, by others. You can also combine the practice with some counseling. I did. I found both very helpful.

So there are eight steps to this process. Last week we talked about them, and also about the three preliminary steps. Motivation is first, as in all meditative practices. We start with a good motivation, one that is peaceful and caring. And we want good things for ourselves and others. We need to remember that, it is very important to start the practice in a positive state of mind, with a positive, constructive motivation.

The second preliminary is wisdom of emptiness. We need to recognize the selflessness, the non-fixity, the non-solidity of all things. We need to recognize that things are not what they appear, that we invest them with a kind of reality they don't really have. Things are much more fluid, much more relative, much more transformable. And that includes us, "me." We need to be able to see ourselves as fluid and transformable. And we need to see the images that we create as fluid and transformable. Then we are open to change, and we don't get stuck. We take our imagination and we use it for our own transformation. Bob Thurman likes to talk about the psychonaut who, like the astronaut, puts on

a spacesuit and goes for a spacewalk, an inner spacewalk in this case, to explore. This may sound a bit odd. The idea is that we have to learn to tolerate *the unbearable lightness of being*, as Milan Kundera would say. The fact is that when we really look at it, life is not as solid or as definite as it seems. Things can change in a moment. We could die any moment. We are all constantly changing. Think about it. You have a self. I know who I am, you know who you are. But if you really do the math, if you look at yourself critically, think of yourself and how your appearance has changed since you were three, or four or 20, and your equipment inside, that body of yours, has totally changed too. So much has changed ... Where is the continuity?

You really need to understand that there is another way to think about this life, and about you, a way that is much less scary, and more open. Modern biologists like to talk about living beings as open systems. And that is what we are. We exist within a sort of equilibrium, constantly rebalancing, always in a give-and-take with the universe. And without help in that give-and-take we cannot be healthy. We have to be open, to others and to life, in order to be really alive -- and especially to grow. We need to be able to take in, to use all the nutrients available to us, and for that we need to be open. The wisdom of emptiness is not to be afraid of openness.

Gelek Rimpoche, who has offered a beautiful initiation, a beautiful introduction, to the Healing Mother practice, says that if you are trying to meditate on emptiness, do not worry about trying to understand the idea of

emptiness, just think of a big open space, like a big, fuzzy, white cocoon in which you can be, easily. This is a very sweet image. We don't need to understand the nuts and bolts of emptiness at this point. What we need is not to be afraid of the spaciousness of our minds, so that we develop our capacity to see that we are not stuck to one content or another, one narrative or another. We need to be open, we need to open our minds so that we can be more flexible, and thus more creative. With that we are prepared to go through this process.

The third preliminary is security, confidence, in us and in this process. To get that we reassure ourselves that we have the first two prerequisites, and these are closely linked to our guide, our teacher. These elements -- the mentor, the right motivation and emptiness wisdom -- come together as a firewall that stops all negativity from getting through and throwing us off course.

After the three preliminaries comes transformation, in three stages. We went through the first stage last week. Today we will do the second, and next week we will go over the third. The guts of the practice is in the material that we are covering in these three weeks, last week, this week and next. But before moving on let me address a couple of questions.

One question is, if you get stuck in your practice, how do you get unstuck? There are many answers, depending on where you are. In general terms though, I would say that there are two things, two tools that work like sledgehammers, in the sense that they clear the way, they destroy obstacles. Although in this

context a better term might be a magic wand, or a diamond scepter, without the implication of so much construction. Here we are talking about how to open to our bliss, how to get to blissful openness. At this point the goal is to increase your mind's capacity to be in a bliss state, to have positive experiences, and to be inspired, as it says in the *mind training* practices we went through last year, like Chekawa's *seven-point mind training*. That is a great teaching, with many applications. And it is particularly useful in this practice. The line that fits so well right here is simply

*"Always rely exclusively on the happy mind."*

We know that the human brain is born with a negative bias, and so it tends more naturally towards stress and trauma -- many times more, 10 times or 100 times more -- than towards bliss or happiness. We have to reverse that normal bias if we want to succeed in transforming ourselves and adapt to a life in civilization, to living in safety and comfort even if that is not the natural way to live, and to not be pushed by the insanity that goes on all around us. For that we have to learn how to disarm.

And how do we do that? We learn to disarm by trusting our bliss. That was Joseph Campbell's advice for the hero's journey, "Follow your bliss." In this context, the bliss that will guide you is in the experience of connecting with your mentor, and in merging with him or her. For example, in my experience, in my meditation practice, if I feel that maybe it has gotten stale, or maybe I start doubting, asking myself, "why am I imagining these Tibetan deities and things,



why am I spending my time with this?" suddenly, I get a little glimpse of my primary mentor, His Holiness the Dalai Lama. There he is, in my head, tweaking his nose at me. He seems to be saying, "Wake up, Joe, enough of that!" And then, with that, I feel supported, "oh, I am not alone in this, there is great company in this." Then, if you want you to go on further, you imagine your mentor melting into you. This is actually very interesting, it is a going-back-to-the-womb kind of experience. When the mentor melts into you and dissolves you have merged, fused, with your ideal -- with mother, father, or whoever he or she represents -- and that's generally a sign that now is the time you can tap into your bliss, you can get a real taste of bliss.

So that is one way to overcome obstacles: you focus on the bliss of connecting to your mentor, your teacher; in your teacher you have a real and reliable companion and guide. The other way is wisdom practice, which in this case is more like a supernova fire than a diamond scepter or a sledgehammer. When you find yourself stuck ask yourself, "What is it, what am I clinging to?" And you turn your awareness to whatever you might be clinging to. It may be a state of fear, or discomfort. And why am not feeling comfortable letting go, letting go of my fears, letting go of my ordinary self-image, whatever that is. This wisdom of emptiness and interconnectedness is the ultimate asset, the ultimate solvent, it gets us through all obstacles. But how to make it deliver on this promise, to dissolve the obstacles, is the challenge, and it requires understanding; this is key.

This practice is highly effective for disarming and healing our traumatic experiences and for getting to our more subtle mental layers. But it doesn't work right away, we have to work our way through. First you establish the right environment, which is a safe environment with a sense of connection to something that is pure, really pure, and unconditionally positive. Hypnotherapists call this a positive affect bridge. If you connect to your positive affect, your mind will be much better prepared to identify and face whatever is bothering you, and to separate from it. And remember, everything is very relative, because there are gradations of affliction, nine of them at a simple level: gross gross, middle gross and subtle gross, then gross middle, middle middle, and subtle middle, and so on. The important point here is that there are many layers of afflictions, like ingredients in a lasagna. At the beginning it is easy to see the gross layers, but not so easy to see the subtle layers. You just have to dig in further, keep at it, and keep providing the conditions for your mind to feel safe and stay clear, so that it keeps digging in.

Your mind will heal you as long as you provide the conditions in which it can do so. That is why it is very important to create a totally safe environment, and to be there, within the protective firewall, like in a mandala palace, which is a palace of learning, of inspiration and sublimation and so on, where you can be in dialogue with your mentor. The more vivid your sense that "I am in dialogue with my mentor, and I really am in this place, this sacred place, where all beings are enlightened beings" the more effective the practice will be, the

more healing your mind will be. So try to cultivate what is called in this tradition *vivid appearance*. For that you keep on imagining, and always aware that "Ok, this is not a real house, it is not made of real cement, this house is actually made of translucent luminous walls and panels, and there are all kinds of divine beings sitting there, pretending to be ordinary human beings ..." Normally one would think of this as, "oh, this is crazy, I better go back to reality." But this kind of simulation is actually very helpful. It is very helpful therapy. And it comes with a special methodology, a manual and a community to teach you; you get the full package. And you can trust the experiences that come with it, if you follow the instructions.

Trust the practice, build it, build on it. And when your images become really vivid, when they acquire that quality of vividness, you are ready to cultivate what is called *divine pride*. You try to find that part of your mind that is the most compassionate, the most positive about life, the most radically open to life. And then you say "Here is Sheer Brilliance, I am really Sheer Brilliance, and this is my feeling of it." That is divine pride.

These two elements, vivid appearance and divine pride, are connected. Together they create a very vivid sense that I am really in this experience, that in this moment I am experiencing the best quality of my mind. That quality is what I choose to identify with. And so we identify with that best quality of ours. That sets up our healing space, and it will remain so as long as we are connected with our mentor.

I hope that is helpful. If you can see what disturbs you, if you can identify the disturbance, even if it is long after the disturbance occurred, you are on the right path. "Awareness shreds existence," Aryadeva said. Once you have a glimmer of insight, that's enough, it shreds existence. The insight is that now I am aware that I can manually override the system in my brain, I can get to the higher consciousness, which is designed to access the old software program, the program that carries the traumas of childhood, and of evolution, and update it. This is how mindfulness works. That is the awesome power of awareness, of the "now." Just paying attention makes things better. Awareness opens the system. It works like opening a file in your computer: once it is open you can work on it, revise it, edit it and save the revised file. In that sense our brains work the same way, we can revise anything once we bring awareness to it.

Another question is, what is being radically open to life? What does it feel like? In general we think of life as what happens outside of us, what is external to us. But we are life also. The first thing for being radically open to life is that we need to be radically open to ourselves, inside of us. That means trusting that all the things that we may be scared of in ourselves, what we are that we don't like in ourselves, are not the essence of who we are; and not fighting those scary things inside, or walling them off, but being open to them. Have all the doors open. Remember free association, in psychoanalysis? So, I'm going to disarm, I'm going to let it all come out, I'm going to face it all. And I can do that

because I know that it will all turn out for the better this way. Even if it is bad at times it will all be useful, experiencing it will be useful. Once we have internalized that openness, once we have it in ourselves, we can extend it to others, naturally.

We all know, because we have had the experience, that when we feel happier we are more open. And when we are more open we pay more attention to life, and notice more, and enjoy more experiences. We notice many things that otherwise we wouldn't notice.

One part of our system is based on survival, it is self-protective; this part feels closed, it feels tight, and knotted, and isolated, like being in a fortress and fully armed. The other part of our system is based on love and connection; and that feels open, more fluid, free to be more spontaneous, more creative. And so we choose, which part do we want to be in? As one of my dear friends likes to say, you go where the water is warm.

All life moves along three pivots, or three nodes. These nodes are the same in every life story: a person is born, a person develops, a person dies. Or, if you are Buddhist, you begin with death: you die first, then you are reborn, and then you develop -- and then of course you die again, that's the cycle. To reframe our life story we work with these three nodes. We are going to follow the Buddhist order of things. We are doing the psychological version. That means that we are not trying to die, or live forever, but live more fully, make the most out of this life. We are trying to die psychically, so-to-speak. We are trying to give

up and let go of that attachment to our sense of self and reality that is holding us back, binding us, dragging us down. We are trying to let go of the sense of self and reality that holds us in confusion, fear, anger, and other poisonous experiences. To let go we use the reality of death as a kind of solvent. We remind ourselves that we are not going to be in this body forever, we are not going to be this person forever. So why not sit back and let go of the poisonous experiences and feelings? Try while you still have time, don't take all that negativity to the grave. Open and find out what else you could be, what else is there. That's the idea, that's why we start with the death node.

As we practice death, we begin with the meditation of the eight dissolutions, the eight stages of dissolving the ordinary body and mind. We dissolve our experience of having an ordinary body and mind, and we reach for awakening in a state of body and mind into the most primal layer of energy and awareness, what is called the clear light of death, or the clear light of bliss. I prefer bliss, there is bliss in death. The French know about that, they call the sexual orgasm *la petite morte*, or "the little death." Why? because we momentarily lose our sense of separateness, which is what we want. We also have the example of people who go through a near-death experience, which is like going into the deep layers of the mind. The awareness of that experience can be very liberating. It can open the door to transformation. So try to imagine yourself going through a near-death experience, and being aware of it afterwards. When you come back everything is going to seem a bit different,

you are going to feel a little different; your perspective will have shifted. A different perspective brings power to transformation. It is like the first astronauts who went to the moon and from there looked back at planet Earth. They saw it floating in space, like a speck of blue-green in total darkness. After that everything was different for them, their perspective changed, just like in a mystical experience.

In this meditation, when we dissolve into the death experience consciously, we are rehearsing the death process to facilitate our transformation. As we go through the eight dissolutions we imagine how our solids dissolve into our liquids, our liquids dissolve into our bodily heat, the heat into our breath gases, and gases to space; then we dissolve our mind, starting with the coarse layers that are biased by stress, addiction or attachment, defensiveness or anger, delusion or confusion. After we dissolve all that we are down to our raw material, our original face, the fountain of eternal youth, Joni Mitchell's golden stardust, whatever you want to call it. And we start from there, with a clean slate. And so we can be reborn.

That's the first node. And so we take on death, which is our worst fear, the worst thing that can happen to us, and we turn it into liberation, into a doorway, a portal to a whole new life. We turn ordinary death into a path to what is called the "truth body," which is a body made of our realization of the truth: "I see now that I am not this coarse material body, I am not so solid, I am not as solid as I appear to be, there is something in me that is very subtle, more wavelike and

luminous and flexible and transformable ..." All of us can go to that state by imagining dying and going through the eight stages of dissolution of body and mind -- and there we are, in the clear light of death!

Then comes the second node, the second stage, rebirth, or resurrection. We re-emerge in a new form, we pick and we choose what we need to be who we want to be. We are not waking up with all of our usual demons, it's not "here I am, again, it is me, me and my cyclic existence ..." Now I'm coming back with my better angels, choosing consciously and purposefully to identify with those parts that are positive, with my embodiment of my mentor's discourse, my inner discourse, and my linguistic capacity to use symbols to push stress out of my system. And, with all that, I will develop sheer joy, I will embody the sheer joy of being free and aware.

How do we express that sheer joy, how do we come to it? That is done by reemerging in our new form wisely. A Buddhist practitioner who is not doing this practice would go through the eight stages of dissolution, but now in reverse order, and so they are called the eight stages of reemergence. But in this practice, instead of just riding our biology and going through a process of reemergence in a coarse mentality, and physical sensory body, just like any ordinary person, we now build a body made of mind.

What does that mean, a body made of mind? Normally, as ordinary people we think confidently, "this is my body, and it is where I really live." But actually we don't have a clue about what our body is. When you look at your



body more closely it seems to be many things. You may look at yourself in the mirror, or put your body under a microscope, or a CAT scan, or think about when you were two years old, or five or 15, and compare. It is clear that your body is not really as you think of it. You realize that you are living in a mental image of your body, your own mental image, built by you. That is why when we look in the mirror we still feel young. I still feel young when I see my reflection, I don't see my white hair like the white hair on other old guys. I feel like I'm still 14! And we act like we are 14. We do that if we are living with that kind of younger mental body image, which is not a realistic image. And what happens when we actually don't live in our body? We do stupid things, we mindlessly bump into things, we don't take good care of our body, we don't feed it right, or let it rest right. Why do we do that? Because we are not living in our bodies, not really. We are like Mr. Duffy, who "lived a short distance from his body ..." in James Joyce's *Dubliners*. We live in our mind, in mental concepts. So now we are going to generate a new concept, a new self concept, a new self-image, and a body made of mind.

We generate a new self-construct, a new self-image and a new self-concept, born partly out of our dialogue with our mentor, but mostly out of our aspiration to live in a way that is purely joyful and compassionate. We mix that joyful spirit with a new body image. And we do that guided by a process called "The Five Enlightenments." That sounds good, right? Not just one enlightenment,

but five of them! The Five Enlightenments are there to guide us, as we recreate a person made of enlightened material.

This may be too much information all at once, but I want to give you a good taste of the practice. As I have mentioned a few times, this is "like the stuff that dreams are made on." And in this particular case it's more like lucid dreaming. We dream of being the kind of person we really want to be, what psychoanalysts call our ego ideal. You try to resurrect your ego ideal, and become that. And how does that work?

I'll give you a streamlined version of the traditional Five Enlightenments practice, not necessarily for you to do it, but to give you a little flavor of it. In this class, when we meditate together at the beginning of each session, we first dissolve the universe into space, open space. And out of this space comes a moon disc, or a sun disc. In this practice we begin in the same way, with open space and light. Everything else appears out of language. The fact is that the basis of this process is psycho-linguistic, it uses our capacity for language to reconstruct ourselves, our psychic self, in dialogue with enlightened teachers and guides, and with enlightened traditions. In the West, language is also seen as playing a key role in our identity. Psychologists believe that we humans build a sense of self as we acquire language, as we learn to speak, listening to our parents speak to us and us speaking to them.

So, we imagine that out of space comes a clear light, and then an OM appears. We say the syllable "OM" -- or OH -- and OM comes. It is white. Then it

turns into a moon, a horizontal moon disc. This luminous moon disc represents the *reflective intuition*, which is the first enlightenment. The reflective intuition is also called mirror-like intuition, mirror-like wisdom or mirror-like enlightenment. It is the enlightenment that recognizes that everything that appears to be solid is actually more like a reflection, like a dream. That is also the message of the quantum physicist, that matter is mostly empty, mostly space. At the quantum level all matter is quite similar, made of electric fields and charges. But that is not the way we perceive things, we perceive things as definitely solid, perhaps at times solidly bad, right? Now we try to bring a little space into that perception. Think about it. If my body wasn't running on some kind of protective energy, what would that feel like? Our physicality appears different now; now our sense of physicality is illuminated by our intuition that our physicality is a reflection, just like a mirror image.

That is the first wisdom, and also the genius of our physical system, because it's some sort of a miracle that we can actually walk, and talk, and touch, and so on and so forth, with a body that is not solid. That new sense of physicality that I have is not running on fear, or separateness, or alienation, but on openness. That makes my body feel much lighter, like a reflection -- and like the moon, cool and calm.

The second element that appears out of the moon disc after OM is the syllable AH. Listen to these sounds, OM AH ... These are very basic human sounds, sounds that our breath makes. Out of AH comes a sun disc. It piles up on

the moon disc, like in a sandwich: first the bread layer and then the cheese layer. The sun disc represents the second enlightenment, which is *empathic intuition*, or equality intuition. This is the intuition that all sensitive beings are equally precious, all of them deserve to be happy equally, all of them are equally sensitive to suffering. I feel your joy as I feel mine, sensitivity is non-local.

We all have this empathic capacity, but we don't live in it. We keep it out, we wall it off, so that I'm in a guarded state, a guarded situation of just me and my selected friends. But now we're going to liberate that empathic capacity, we are going to open up, and we are going to build a whole new way of being with radical empathic openness. That openness is liberating. It makes a genius out of our sensory system. How? Until now, my sensory system had the capacity to feel only my pleasure and pain; and when I am feeling my pleasure and my pain only, I end up feeling isolated, separated and biased. But now I know, I am aware that everyone wants no pain, and wants to be happy -- just like me! I can feel everybody's pleasure and pain, I understand now how that works, I know what is going on with other people in the room, around me, and in the planet. In that way, the second wisdom makes our sensory system really objective.

The syllable HUM comes next, out of the sun disc. It could also be a G for genius, standing for "may we all have pure genius." The G turns into a sword, or a light saber, representing the third enlightenment, *discriminating intuition*. The syllable stands on the hilt of the sword. The sword is in flames, standing straight. Such is the sword of wisdom, the sword of discriminating, analytic wisdom. The

sword is the symbol of Sheer Brilliance; and the activity of Sheer Brilliance is analysis, liberating insight, insight that cuts through confusion, doubt and error. Now our cognitive system is being run by the discerning, discriminating, or aesthetic intuition, that is the intuition that understands subtle shades, that appreciates distinctions and differences. That is the purpose of conceptuality in this tradition, to heighten the particular, the individual, so we can appreciate distinctions. And for that language is key. Linguists and sociologists of language say that language is really about enhancing distinction, difference; for them language is a cognitive system.

So, suddenly, the light saber beams light everywhere, like a beacon. The saber shines everywhere, filling the universe. And as it fills the universe it touches all beings who are in need, and helps them out. It helps them to cut through their confusion, their doubts, their delusions, their distortions, their isolation. And it offers clarity. Here there's a boost of clarity and awareness energy, like a wave going out in all directions, sending solidarity and clear awareness for everyone, everywhere. Then the wave comes back. There is always a give-and-take, because this kind of practice is really about living in society, it is about social behavior, and altruism; it is about a way of being in the world with others. First I find within myself the clarity of a blissful and open relationship with my body, I get a different sensitivity to myself, to my physicality. And then I can extend that sensitivity to others. I then identify, as specifically as possible, that part of my mind that has the capacity to cut through confusion. And I imagine sharing that

with the world. As I share it, all living beings appear in the form of little Sheer Brilliances. They are sending back their spirit, their blessings. Those I have helped towards enlightenment are grateful, and those that were already enlightened have validation: "Yes, yes, clarity!" Then everything dissolves into the light saber, and the light saber becomes extremely brilliant. That is the fourth enlightenment, *executive intuition*. This intuition takes motivation, or emotions -- that normally are about envy, and competition, and security -- and turns them into a contribution, a service, or some other form of altruistic energy, towards building a mastery for the cultural task of sharing enlightened wisdom. Executive intuition is there to guide us on how to share enlightenment. That is the specific task to this practice, with this specific archetype. And the implement, the tool in this case is the saber, or the sword. But it could be something else with another archetype, like a scepter or a lotus, or a wheel. The point is that the implement is there to show that some cultural work is at hand. This isn't just about becoming a different being, but about embodying an activity, a kind of genius.

And so the executive intuition guides our emotions. While the discriminating intuition is there to guide our cognition, so that we can appreciate the subtle distinctions between people and things, between different kinds of suffering and different kinds of happiness, the executive intuition is there to help us understand the real virtue of our emotions, which is to give us the motivation to be beneficial, to help get the job done, to build the teamwork, the team spirit, to

do whatever is needed to further the task. And so we try to be helpful in our actions.

Finally, out of the light coming out of the sword another light appears. First it's like an aura, and suddenly Manjushri appears, the form of Manjushri, and it is you as Manjushri. Here let me make clear that all these things, these images that appear one after the other, you are. This is because your mind is dead, or in a near-death experience, and when it comes back, you find yourself dawning first as a moon disc of cool reflective awareness, or intuition; then as a sun disc, on top of the moon disc, as in a sandwich; and then as an implement that shows a nascent vow, or interest, or commitment for doing some specific task with your new way of being. Then you practice doing the task, which in this case it is sharing your brilliance with all living beings. As you complete that task, all living beings validate your action. And that seals your development. The radiating sword sends lights in all directions, and you appear, now as a nascent Sheer Brilliance, a nascent hero altruist -- and that is the fifth enlightenment. At your heart is a moon disc and a sun disc. On top of them is the exclamation point. The saber is in your hand, and there you are, beaming the light. Now you are clear light emptiness. And so you embody the five intuitions; you have recreated your body, your body is now made of the five intuitions.

That is all work on the perceptual system. Your intuition of reality, that is your normal sense of reality, is that I am 'me', just an ordinary Joe, I can see myself clearly. We go around thinking that we know exactly who we are, but we don't

know, and we never ask ourselves, really, we don't look for the answer very deeply. Even Descartes, who said "I think, therefore I am" fell short. Obviously he wasn't thinking very hard about his thoughts when he said that. Otherwise he would have seen through them, and he would have dissolved them, and entered into the space of " ... therefore I am *not!*" -- or whatever. And now here we are, showing that our minds can create another self with a body made of mind, and that we can feel like a person in that body made of mind. That proves that our perceptual system is under our control, guided by the clarity inside of us, that we don't need to perceive things out of habit, or delusion or whatever; we can perceive things for a very specific purpose, with a specific vision in mind.

There is some beautiful symbolism that I want to share with you briefly. Symbolism helps to understand this kind of practice. In this tradition the symbolism is elegant and beautiful. And the images are symbols that can have many meanings. One is that the moon disc symbolizes the vowels, and the sun disc symbolizes the consonants. In this case the moon and sun are a symbol of our capacity to express, to narrate and control our poetic creation of reality. Vowels and consonants appear, and their number is increased and doubled, until there are 32 vowels (from 13 initially) and 80 consonants (from 34 initially) representing the 32 marks and 80 signs of a fully altruistic being. The Buddha had 32 marks and 80 signs: elongated ears, tufted hair, circles on the palms of the hands, even teeth, lined shoulders, upper body like a lion, and so on... An



altruistic being is a beautiful being, a being made of joy. The vowels are located at, or identified with, the 13 male and female erogenous zones. You may say that's a bit odd, even sort of kinky. The intention is to point out that we have a body that can feel bliss. And just as we have a body that can feel bliss normally in a sexual way, we can also fill our bodies with bliss energy, positive blissful energy, if we open up to it, tap into it, if we open up to our body of love, as Norman O'Brown, the psychoanalytic philosopher from the 1960's who wrote a book called *Love's Body*, would say.

That is the idea, that this is a body made of love. No just love in some vague way, but it is the language matter of love, the expression of love. This makes me think of my favorite poetry critic, Allen Grossman, author of a beautiful book on the purpose of poetry, called "Against Our Vanishing." In the book he offers this Jewish teaching, that the purpose of poetry is the conservation of the human image. With poetry we preserve the image of one we love, of "the beloved." The Hero and God images are only different versions of the beloved. The beloved is a being you can love safely and unconditionally. And poetry can capture that kind of love. Grossman says that poetry conveys not just an image, or a word, or a thought, but something more profound, what he calls the language matter of the person. The poem is the language matter of the person, of the beloved, and that is what the poem transmits. This is some sort of mystical notion, that we are more than just bodies, that there is a part of us that can flow through time, because of our capacity to express ourselves to others, to influence others

through words and deeds, words and love. In poetry there is a spirit that can go from person to person and inhabit different bodies and can serve love's body, it can serve the capacity to love, it can embody love and master the art of being a loving being. This is a beautiful teaching, and I hope it helps you understand what is being rehearsed in this creative and poetic process of rebuilding ourselves.

Moving on with symbolism, the moon and sun discs can represent other pairs, like subject and object; or sperm and egg. Sperm and egg are the materials needed for a new life. They come together and they become one, then we have a zygote. This is the beginning of our new person, the person we are giving birth to, in our own minds. In some meditations, we imagine our birth from the womb of the mentor's partner. We replay the primal scene with our mentor and his or her partner as mother and father, and we are reborn. As our new person we are not identifying with our gross body, our ordinary DNA. Rather, we pick up our identity from our new way of feeling and thinking and speaking -- and this is language matter. We identify with that by saying "This is me, I am this egg and sperm of language matter, I am this joyful, blissful energy and awareness. I am going to share my brilliance with the world, and so liberate beings." We take life, we conceive ourselves in the moment when our verbal minds appear in the form of HUM, or G. We take birth in a new body, in that new zygote, we inhabit it with a consciousness. That is the third enlightenment. And then out of that we develop.

In this context, in this interpretation, this very groovy and weird interpretation, the energy going out of the sword and coming back into it in the fourth enlightenment is actually condensing the normal development of a living being in the womb. This can also apply to a bodhisattva, a hero altruist, and condense its development. To become a Bodhisattva it takes, it is said, three incalculable eons. With this practice we can condense that 10-stage process into one single process of give-and-take with the universe. In this way, we can become an enlightened altruist much more quickly. With this technology we can separate the positive from the negative, what is useful to us in our development from what is not, and identify within ourselves the energy, or the mindset, or the imagery that allows us to really become that altruistic person that we'd like to be. So that is weird, right? And it is beautiful, isn't it?

There are a lot of interesting thoughts in this. I am just trying to give you a flavor of what is involved here, at this level of meditation. But for most of us this level of meditation is not really possible. The actual meditation needs to be much simpler. Normally we condense the process into three or four simple actions. The moon disc appears, the sun disc appears, and out of it comes the syllable, and light goes out and then comes back, and it becomes the deity. That is enough, that is fine. The point here is that after going through the death process, through the eight dissolutions, you reboot your mind, so that it is empty, blank. And instead of coming back to being little old "me" again, you try to bring awareness to the process, and you dream of yourself as a heroic altruist. And

you get a feeling for what that is like. In so doing you are using development as a path to embodying bliss, you are "following your bliss." The development process goes from something that is undifferentiated and simple, just pure space and clarity, and then a differentiated form starts to emerge and develops.

Every night, when you go to sleep, you can do the death meditation. You do the eight dissolutions, and when you wake up in the morning, you can resurrect as the hero altruist, instead of waking up as little old "me," filled with worries and pressures. That would be different. Why not try waking up this way once and see what happens? If you start to wake up as the ideal version of you, and not as ordinary you, the general prediction is that when you die and you are reborn you will have the identity of who you would like to be in this life. In any case, even if the experiment is just virtual, if you do it enough times your mind and your brain will start to become the you that you would like to be, and it will let go of the you that you don't want to be.

So start letting go of the you that you don't want to be, the you that is not much fun to be. This is not to say that we are going to reject any one part of our beings; we are just letting go of what is not helpful, what we can do better without, what will free us so we can do more constructive things, be more helpful.

Bob Thurman likes to call this development process "resurrection." This reminds me, last Easter we had visitors from out of town. We took them to this church around the corner, an amazing French church that is a version of the

grotto where Saint Bernadette saw the Virgin. It is a beautiful church on 114th street and Morningside Drive. Mass is in French, which is very special for my sister and I because we grew up in Switzerland. We went there for mass and we heard a fabulous sermon, the best sermon I ever heard in my life. The preacher talked about the resurrection of Christ, how he was human until he died, and when he was reborn he became God. I guess you could say he became cosmic. Heinz Kohut would say that he discovered his cosmic narcissism. Anyhow, Christ was reborn and became one with all things. And by loving him we can also become one with all things. That was the message of the sermon. And that is exactly what this teaching is about.

I don't mean to confuse you by bringing up another spiritual language. But to me it is very interesting that the two teachings are very similar. This reminds me of something I heard all the time when I went to church, the Mystery of Faith. Does anybody here know what this is? Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. Of course, it is not really about Christ, but about something more basic, more fundamental. It is about life and how it happens. Life doesn't begin or end with any one of us, life is a process that continues, on and on. And if we really want to have a meaningful life, one that is not filled with fear and isolation and hurt and so on, we have to adapt to a bigger and wider picture, to go beyond our ordinary self-image and start to tap into that part of us that can benefit us in the world, that loving part of us.

It is interesting that both traditions talk about a fundamental transformation of how we live our lives, from alienation to a more engaged way of being, a more inspired way of being. Both traditions tell us that recreating ourselves as larger beings is good for us. But in the Buddhist tradition we don't leave it to Christ. In Buddhism we recreate ourselves. And none of us is considered to be cosmic except insofar as we embrace the cosmos with our awareness. I find that resonance kind of neat.

I have given you an expanded interpretation about what this re-emerging process is all about. The details are not important. I talked about them to give you a better taste of it, and get your enthusiasm going. The main thing to remember is, after the eight dissolutions and after you have cleared your mind, try to come back in a positive form. In this way you will come back with a sense of renewal, and you will feel refreshed and positive. Then you can work on becoming who you want to be. That is the real essence of this teaching. It is very simple, really.

## Chapter 13

### The Third Node: Turning Stressful Existence into a Heroic Life of Compassion

Here we are in the midst of Part Two, and we're doing what my analyst Rolf would call "a mind trip" together. We are transforming our way of being, we are envisioning who we want to be, we are rehearsing our capacity to transform our experience, to change the film that keeps playing in our minds. We have talked about that film, the film that is our life story, the film that plays in our medial prefrontal cortex, always in a loop, going back and forth, saying "You're Joe, remember you're Joe, you can't do this, you can't do that, this is what your life is, this is where you were born, this is where you are dying, ..." This film is always orienting me towards that story, the story of "me" watching out for "me" and what I care for, no matter how I feel about it, whether it is happy, horrified, or somewhere in the middle, indifferent. I realize now that this film is the main limitation -- the mother of all limitations! -- on my experience, because the self is the mother of all limitations, it is what tells us "you can't change, you are what you are, don't try to change."

So let's take a good look at ourselves. Do you ever look in the mirror and wonder how you got to be you, how you got your body and mind? Think about it. I know that my body started out as a couple of cells in my mother's womb, but it has come a long way since then. It doesn't look much like that little blurb, that little bubble in the ultrasound, and yet I still recognize it as "me," all throughout

my life. And what about my mind and all its experiences? The reality out there appears very clear. But then there's all the stuff in my mind ... Sometimes I'm this and sometimes I'm that, sometimes I'm on top of the world and sometimes I feel so down on things it feels like everything is falling apart, and sometimes I feel somewhere in between those two. So, the question is, where's the real Joe? Will the real Joe please stand up? Do the analysis yourself, lie on the couch for a while with that, take a good look at your mind, how variable it is, how complex and highly textured, how much you can change over the course of a day, or a year, or a lifetime ...

And so we realize that the notion that what we are is embossed somewhere, that there's one name for me and one story for me is foolish. My body and my mind are constantly changing. In a way we Americans know this already. We believe in identity crises, we believe in our potential to transform our lives and ourselves, we talk about re-inventing ourselves. But the change we're talking about here is not like changing your name, moving to a new town, getting a new job, or whatever. This change is more like an inside-out job, you are changing the very software that keeps you feeling your experiences in the same old way, day after day. How do we engage in this heroic transformation of ourselves? We use imagery, in our analytic practice and in our compassion practice. With imagery we can connect to a practice for developing bliss.



Let's have a quick review, to get to where we are at this point. In our last discussion we talked about the eight-step process for transformation, the eight-stage dissolution practice, which sets the crucible, the incubator, or the flight simulator, that we use to learn to master our transformation. And we talked about the three preliminaries that we need to develop before the eight dissolutions. First is *positive motivation*, and that means peace and care for ourselves, peace and care for all beings. Second, we develop *wisdom*: we look into the way we're all interconnected, which is much more so than we appear to be.

Actually, we're like "open systems," to use the biological term. Human beings are so open, that if you really look at yourself critically, if you look for yourself you don't find it, there's something missing that you think is there. We think that we're really fixed, essentially unique. And the reality is that when you look for that fixed part of the self, that uniqueness, you don't find it. There is no bar code anywhere in there with your name on it, that says "yes! this is what you are, specifically and uniquely, this is your own unique essence." Even our genome is constantly changing. And if it weren't it wouldn't make much difference, there is no uniqueness, because with the same genome you can be both Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

The third preliminary is *security*. We need to set up a firewall, and for that we take our positive motivation — stable positive affect, stable positive emotions of love, care, joy, peace and so on — and we sandwich it together with the

wisdom that can see through all the forms that confuse us. And so with those materials we build ourselves that firewall. Last week we invited Manjushri, Sheer Brilliance, the wisdom hero, to set it up for us, or to affirm and rubber-stamp it for us. We had our own little firewall, and then Manjushri came and reinforced it, made it really strong. His presence is key, because we cannot do this alone; it's only by working together with another that we can build our capacity for radical open-mindedness, for profound wisdom, and for unconditional love and compassion. That protects us from the demons inside of us, and the demons in everybody else, and all the crazy stuff that goes on in the world. It seems that there's one horrendously violent event after another. Violence is always present, always happening. Why? Because destructive forces are always present in all living beings. The only solution is for us to tame our own destructive forces, and for everybody else to do the same. That's the only sensible solution, even though it may sound completely impractical and impossible.

Once the three preliminaries are set in place, they can work together, they're a protective force, a reliable protective force, especially when they're validated, when there is a bond, a commitment, an unshakeable commitment in us to work with others, and for others. This is represented by the Manjushri mentor, and it is in our relationship with our live mentors, the people that we have chosen to represent our ideals. Our ideals need to be realistic, realizable, and not just abstract images. Ultimately, these ideals are bonds that we share with other people. Recognizing all that, we're ready to start working with our

identity, to test it, play with it, have a conscious identity crisis instead of waiting for life to push us around, or take intoxicants and let chemistry do its thing, do it for us. Here we are doing it on our own, using mind power, collective and systematically refined mind power. That's what meditative traditions are about. And so we get to the heart of the matter. That's where we are now.

In the last two chapters we have been talking about the three nodes for transforming our minds, and our life story. The three nodes are the three basic states of all life: death, transition, or reemergence, and life. In previous sessions we talked about death and transition. In death we have de-differentiation: everything dissolves, everything deconstructs deeply, everything comes apart. In transition a seed is formed and cracked open, and out comes a sprout; new life is starting -- we're rebooting. Today we will talk about the third node, about making this life a path to manifesting compassion.

Meditation trains the mind for change. And so it is very important for development. In this practice we meditate on the eight-dissolution process of death to purge ourselves of attachment to the old. In the context of the Lam Rim, you may recall, the death meditation has four steps, or four certainties. First, there is the certainty of death: "I've only got a certain amount of time before my life is over; so what am I waiting for, I better start changing right now ...". Second, there is the certainty that death can come at any moment. Third, we don't know how or when death will come. And fourth, when death comes, we won't be able to hold on to anything, and that includes what gives us our most

basic sense of security, like our body, our loved ones, our possessions, or our status. The only thing that we will have at that point of death is mind. So, for a good death, I have to prepare my mind.

How do we contemplate death, how do we meditate on death in this practice? Meditation is like looking in the mirror. You ask yourself: Where is my mind? It is at that moment when I've got nothing else, when mind is all I've got. How's it doing? If I were to die right now, what would my mind be capable of? What would it be doing? How would it deal with death? Am I ready for death right now?... Death meditation brings the act of death into the here-and-now, to this moment: I'm not going to wait until I die, I'm going to get a head start on death, I am going to practice death, in my simulator, I'm going to do it now, and see what it's like. And then my next life will be in this life! I will be having an afterlife in this life, I'll be cultivating a consciously generated near-death experience, I will look at my life from the big picture, beyond this single lifetime, from a timeless point of view ... Out of that, we start to realize that if we can melt down and deep enough and go all the way to the source of our mind, and then start working at the root, we have much more influence in our development, in the unfolding activities of our mind.

This makes more sense when you think of the mind as a flow. If you want to redirect a stream, or a river, you go to the source; you don't try to redirect it from the mouth, because that would be a more complicated procedure, with a lot more water to manage. But if you make a shift upstream, at the source, the

whole flow shifts much more easily. In the context of the mind, the source is the most undifferentiated part of your mind. And you play around with it, test it, you shift how you are manifesting self, manifesting your life, your reality. In this way you are working from the source and bringing awareness into the process of transformation from the very beginning.

So, we meditate on the eight stages of dissolution to go deeper into ourselves. We stay aware through the whole process, we maintain a continuity of awareness as we go more deeply, all the way into the primal unconscious mind, or primary mind. And if we have maintained awareness all throughout, we wake up with awareness. This is important, because the benefit of having awareness as we wake up is that we get to choose the way we're going to reemerge.

In some practices the way to reemerge is through the *eight stages of reemergence*, which are the eight stages of dissolution but in reverse: the reemergence of consciousness would be to experience first immanence, or lack of consciousness experience, go next one by one to the radiance experience, the moonlight experience, the feeling of death awareness, air or wind awareness, heat awareness, fluid awareness, physical awareness. If you stay aware through the whole process of transition, you can actually control your re-emergence, your rebooting process. And in this practice you can jumpstart the process by meditating on the five enlightenments instead of the eight stages of reemergence.

We talked about the five enlightenments during last session. They are also called the five wisdoms, or the five intuitions, or the five intuitive awarenesses. And what they do is help free the mind to be more flexible, to be in the bigger picture, so we can see everything more creatively. They are five deployments of our awareness, available to guide and govern the functioning of the five basic systems -- often referred to as "aggregates" -- that make up our human mind and body: our physicality, our sensitivity, our discernment or cognition, our motivation or emotion, and our perception. If you are aware and able to watch the development process of your five systems, then you can direct it, control it. As you reemerge you choose to experience your five basic systems differently, more openly.

I'm not suggesting that you go home and practice all this. I'm just trying to give you a feeling for what the journey would be like. Should you choose to be on the journey at some point, and get the full equipment and the full "mission impossible" message, you won't have to disavow your whole take on life. Still, there is a difference between learning about these things intellectually and becoming familiar with them by doing them. In other words, to become familiar not only with the map but also with the territory, it requires practice.

At this point in your regular practice hopefully you are doing some visualization, or at least some mindfulness. As you try to be mindful of your object of meditation and you reach stillness, or clarity, or openness, be very mindful of how you come back, how you reengage with the world -- in mental activity, in

verbal activity, in physical activity. You want to come back and engage more mindfully, more creatively; you want a peaceful, caring and kind way of being, you are choosing to embody an altruistic way of being.

The five enlightenments, or intuitions, can be paired with the five aggregates that constitute the basic human being, and guide us in their transformation. So we look at our physicality with *reflective, mirror-like intuition*; we look at our sensitivity with *empathic intuition*; at our cognition with *discerning intuition*; our emotions with *activity intuition*; and our perceptions with an all-knowing intuition, or *ultimate intuition*. Let us go over some of this in more detail.

Starting with the first system, which is your physicality, if you look at it with *mirror-like intuition* you experience your body as a reflection. You don't sign on to the fear-based self-protective reification, like "Oh, this is my body, I have a real body." You recognize that your experience of your body is more like a mental body image and that the body image is actually a construction, a reflection. It's a mental construct, not an actual physical thing ...

You then move on to sensitivity and look at it with *empathic intuition*. This means that, instead of being sensitive to myself as I always do, I now open up to others. And I become aware of this very freaky situation: everyone around me is just as sensitive as I am! Isn't that mind-blowing? You can feel this interpersonal connection sometimes, when you have a baby and become a parent, and you get a gut feeling for what that other living thing is and wants. The same happens with a loved one. However, normally, most of our time we live in denial of our

interconnectedness, and our basic commonality. We feel that other people do not understand us, because "I am so different ...". But that's delusional. We are all the same under the hood, so-to-speak. When you talk to other people about life you hear the same things you feel: "I don't want to suffer, I want to be happy, I don't like that, I don't like how this feels, I like the way that feels ...". The sensitivity that we gain with empathic intuition when we really engage with life is that all life matters equally, that the happiness and suffering of all life matters equally.

*Discriminating intuition*, or esthetic intuition (the sanskrit term is hard to translate) helps us to focus the discursive power of our minds. This power lies in the binary nature of language, of words: It's either black or non-black, white or non-white, ultimate or relative, me or you ... Words are symbols that are binary constructions, designed to function as filters to enhance the differences between things, so that we can find what we're looking for. "No, that's not what I'm looking for ... oh, that might be what I'm looking for ...". We try things and we find out if they are this or that. Our cortical mind, our higher symbolic awareness is part of our mammalian equipment, it is like a supercomputer, and its main function is to enhance what is different, to allow us to distinguish between this and that. And the main distinction that we human beings are interested in is the distinction between pleasure and pain. Everything we encounter is filtered in terms of whether it hurts us or it pleases us. Unfortunately, unless we're conscious of the way our binary minds operate when we distinguish between things, what



happens is that we make these distinctions but we forget that we made them in the first place – and then we tend to exaggerate the differences, see things as much more different than they really are. The wisdom teaching here is to realize that those perceptions are deceptive, exaggerated, and that a wiser use of discursive language is to help us understand relationships – with different parts of ourselves, with different people, with different elements of reality -- and also to help us help others embrace the many ways in which we are distinct though related.

*Executive intuition* helps us harness our emotions, and so our motivation. This is the sword of Manjushri, Sheer Brilliance. We learn to harness our motivation so that it stays positive, so that we think in terms of not only "me" but others as well, teamwork, with the attitude of "yes we can, yes we care!" It's like the Koala brothers, an Australian cartoon for kids that I used to watch with my son when he was three or four years old. As soon as the theme song came up the Koala brothers would hop on a plane together and go looking for people in need. Their motto was "We're the Koala brothers, we're here to help." Their adventures were all about how everyone and everything is interconnected.

Everyone should go on a field trip and watch the Koala Brothers. That's what we are doing here, we are tuning into the "we're-here-to-help" kind of energy, the energy of mammals, the positive energy of caring for others. That is the right tool for the job of being a human being. It is how we finally gain perception, wise perception. Instead of perceiving things naively, individually

real, real on their own, intrinsically real and unrelated to me, I am now using my perceptual system in a much more powerful way, to set a reference point, a tone, for my life. What I mean is that I will now use my ideal self-image, that image of my self as pure genius, what I call my "prosthetic self," to override any perceptions, any clues or any feedback that makes me feel like "I'm a jerk, I can't do this, what do I know, not much, I must be wrong, it must be wrong ..." I am going to perceive myself not as ordinary Joe, but as a brilliant Joe, Manjushri Joe.

By putting my ideal self in my mind, by installing it as a mental image, I am reorienting my perceptual system towards that ideal and away from the main danger, the danger of identifying with my traumatic sense of self and becoming the helpless, powerless child. Because when that happens I perceive the world from a distorted point of view, one where everything becomes overwhelming and threatening, and people become either very idealized or demonized -- and then we're back in that horror movie, the nightmare of our childhood! But now I consciously choose to put that perception of myself out of the way, and I install a new motherboard, a new mother chip, my ideal self: "I can now see myself as a Buddha self ..." And that is the *ultimate intuition*.

These are some of the steps of the practice that we're talking about. I know this is not easy, when you think of it, there are so many steps and images to follow. But in practice you don't need to. There's a script, a script that guides you through the images. It tells you to imagine *this*, then imagine *that*, then

imagine that *this* comes out of *that*, ... and then you're doing it! We will go deeper into the practice during our retreat, and I hope everybody can come. If the fee is a financial stretch for any of you, please contact Menla. We'd love everybody to come, we want to make it possible for everyone to continue this conversation for a few days in a beautiful environment. We'll go over the practice of Sheer Brilliance and we will integrate its soulmate, Prajnāpāramitā, or Transcendent Wisdom. The Prajnāpāramitā sutras are the book that Manjushri holds on top of a lotus by his left shoulder. And the Heart Sutra is part of it. This is a very common practice, a beautiful practice, very beloved throughout Asia, by the Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Vietnamese, and others. It's chanted frequently, especially for healing, at the beginning of teachings, to open the mind, make it fully receptive to the teaching. It was chanted in the movie "The Little Buddha." Did anyone see that movie? One of the most beautiful scenes is when this unearthly voice chants the Heart Sutra, in Sanskrit. It's really beautiful.

Anyway, Prajnāpāramitā represents the beginning of goddess worship in Buddhism. Buddha is the main guy, and Prajnāpāramitā, his soulmate, is the mother of transcendent wisdom. This is very unusual among spiritual traditions, to revolve around a feminine ideal of ultimate wisdom. Not even in Hindu traditions do you find the feminine at the top. Hinduism may have a lot of goddesses, but none of them stand for the ultimate reality. Usually they stand for energy, or life, or something like that. But in Buddhism, in Mahayana Buddhism, where you have ultimate and conventional truths, she represents the

ultimate. Why? Because the feminine mind understands interconnectedness and empathic openness more easily. And so we give tribute to Buddhists' intellectual honesty, or their clarity in observation, in recognizing that the ultimate wiser mind, the wiser nervous system, is the woman's nervous system. The man provides the compassionate energy to move things along; he shows up and does the work. But the guidance system is the woman's wisdom ...

You don't really have to worry about practicing all these things. What I am trying to do here is give you the big picture. Like a liberal arts class, you are here to get an appreciation of the art form. But then, when you want to get more of it, it comes down to practice: you actually have to do it, experience it.

We have been talking about the three nodes of the path for transformation -- death, transition and life -- for a couple of sessions. Last session we covered the second node, transition. Today we will cover the third node. And so we're still in the cauldron, we are in the crucible, in our simulator, we're doing a bit of alchemy, we are transforming our ordinary personality and life story into a heroic personality and life story. In the first node we went through death: we lost our identity, or, if you want to use some fancy biological jargon, we went through the process of dedifferentiation into a path to openness. Instead of fearing things falling apart, we learn to appreciate the openness that is in the space between things, the space that will always be there, that no one can ever take away, no matter what. And the more things fall apart, the more present that space is. That's very important, that's the first node. We have

learned that the essence of everything falling apart is where we actually find what's holding it all together, it is the real potential of clarity, openness, the real fabric or the natural face of our minds, the nature of reality.

And then, out of that, we rebuild ourselves. That is the next node, the transition stage. Here we're taking our life's transitions, mindless transitions we all have in life – for example from childhood to adolescence, or in the case of any other important development -- and we turn them into wake-up transitions, we weave them into a path to the enjoyment of the blissful expression of freedom of mind, and clarity of mind. If our minds are really free and clear, we can become artful people, we can artfully personify what matters, instead of having a hodgepodge, ad-hoc personality, one that was thrown together from a little bit of this and that, of genes of mother and father and of bits of the crazy world we live in, and so on ... and so we end up as neurotic individuals.

You can actually choose to be who you want to be, you can personify your ideals. You don't have to be a Buddhist for that. What I mean is that all of these elements, these major nodes of transition, of opportunities for transformation, are part of all life. The Buddhas don't own them, the tantrtras don't own them. They are accessible to all of us, within ordinary, everyday life.

People have near-death experiences, and people have wake-up experiences, experiences that take us out of our ordinary stupor, our ordinary lives -- and then life as it was is over, and it starts again. Maybe now it will start

with greater clarity, greater appreciation -- that is if we work on it. And how do we work on it?

Imagine what those beginnings would be like if you cultivated a certain way of being purposefully, instead of just waiting for life to happen. If you did this every day, if you made this positive vision of yourself the fabric of your life, you'd be evolving much more quickly. Transitions are happening all the time, everywhere. We're always going from one life to the next, we're leaving one form of life, one job, one relationship, one set of friends or family, one place, kids leave home, or whatever, and we go on to the next phase.

These resemble Erik Erikson's phases of development. Usually, when we go through the phases, from one to another, what's driving us is not so positive: fear, hurt, loss, anger, frustration. But what would happen if those transitions became conscious? We can start by seeing the value of these transitions, take them as opportunities to refine who we are, to choose who we want to be and what path we want to follow. Transitions are sometimes hellish, sometimes heavenly. We need to learn to use them as the opportunities that they are, manage their energy for positive transformation, make transitions truly joyful and truly expressive of our best side, of our genius, of our creativity.

Now we're going into the third node, which is life, and the idea is to turn life into a path to manifest altruism and compassion. What is a life of altruism and compassion? What does it look like, how does it work, how does it feel? Instead of living a life where we barely survive, a life with dread from one day to

the next, one crisis to the next, just getting by, we take life as an opportunity to fully develop and be the very best in us. The Buddhist word for compassion can be translated as "the great lord of the mind" or "the great jewel of the mind." That great jewel of the mind is a wish-fulfilling jewel. It is the most precious thing in all of us. Why? Because it's the one tool that we humans have by evolution, a natural tool we have from birth, a tool that is adapted to our strongly social, strongly cultural way of life. And so it is the right tool to connect to others, to work together and make a good life together. That's a jewel. And how do we organize life around that capacity? We'll talk more about that. But right now I want to address a few questions.

One question is about the White Tara practice. Some may have gone through this practice with Tibetan teachers like our Gelek Rinpoche. This lovely practice is designed for longevity. It is meant to give you a flavor for the traditional forms, the ritual forms. But there is also a scientific teaching in it, or a psychological teaching. Initially, in this type of practice you first have the initiation, which is a ritual, and you don't really understand what is happening; and then you have the teaching, and you get what's happening. Of course, you still don't really understand. You have to ask people. "What's happening? What does that mean? How are we supposed to do that?" You practice and learn and eventually you figure it out.

Tara is about longevity. Longevity is about death, and an issue that comes along with death is fear, fear of death. Tara helps with death. You can prepare

yourself for death with the Tara practice, but if for some reason you find yourself dying before you get a chance to become Tara in this lifetime, you still have a vision of her, and with that she can transport you to her Pure Land. Tara does for you what you can't do for yourself. You're not going to have an ordinary life if you have a connection to this practice, because if your mind isn't strong enough to take death as a path to radical open-mindedness, you can lean on Tara, hold on to her, and she'll keep your mind clear and open through the process. That's basically how it works. It is not that different from Western traditions. For a true believer, having Christ or some other source of inspiration, a positive source of inspiration, is a useful thing as you go through the death process.

So, as we saw earlier, the more things fall apart, the more space there is and the more openness there is. For example, let's say you have a terrible argument with somebody you care about. And it seems like the relationship between the two of you is falling apart. You get angry and you say "I don't want to talk to you ever again." You write him off. Then you spend the next 72 hours thinking about the whole experience, going over it again and again, feeling regret, thinking "Oh my God, that's the story of my life, this relationship is broken, and it's not the first time, what's wrong ...?" Two days later you get a phone call from this person, and he proposes a lunch to talk things over. You go and have lunch together, and you talk it out, you talk about what hurt you or what hurt him ... And out of that space left open by the fallout, your relationship is



strengthened. Why? How did that happen? There was a configuration of patterns that was keeping you apart, misunderstandings or hurts that were not being expressed. Pressure built up and it came to a turning point where things blew up, with such strength, it came close to destroying the whole relationship. But actually things got better, patterns became more coherent. It's the nature of life. As the old saying goes, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

This reminds me of a story that Richie Davidson told, of a woman who had what many would call an amazingly good life. She was a beauty queen when she was young, she raised horses, she was happily married, had three children who were happy and beautiful. And then she got into a fight with her sister. Her sister got into her car and drove away, but somehow the car ran over her, and dragged her, face down, through gravel, for quite a while. After that she became a mess. She felt that she was just destroyed, that her life was over. Her husband left her. It took her some time to recover, but she learned a lot from it. She faced some things about her life, her real life, for the first time. Her illusions fell off. She realized that as a little girl she'd been abused by her father, that her family was completely dysfunctional, that her beauty was an illusion, like so much of her life ... Anyway, it took her a few years to pull herself together, but she did. And then she found a new man who loves her, as she is, and she's much happier. She says that she's happier now because of that experience, the experience of losing her life, that if her life had not gone that way she would not be as happy.

So that's important. We're all busy trying to hold ourselves together; but that holding is often what keeps us suffering. Ironically, we hold on to our suffering. This is the essence of that truth: If we want the suffering to go away, we have to let go of it. We have to realize that our hold on life, our attachment to that life that we see as our life, is what makes us feel threatened, because we are threatened by space, we fear space, that space that comes with transitions, that space that is open possibility.

It is like in the Kalachakra teaching, the teaching of The Wheel of Time. Here the notion about matter is very consistent with modern physics. And that is that the fundamental structure of matter is mostly space -- just like atoms, the fabric of all matter in the universe, which are mostly space. According to Buddhist science, matter is created out of "space particles." This idea is completely against our normal perception, our normal sense of self and everything, everything seems solid. And, of course, if everything is so solid, so is our suffering. We are afraid of space, and yet space is what is going to allow us to move out of our suffering and into something else. There was this conference with the Dalai Lama at a neurological institute, back in the 1990s, and I was talking with one of his students (Lobsang Rapgyay, a psychologist and member of our board, a monk and long-time practitioner) about the Kalachakra. He was talking about suffering, and how they view suffering, how there's always space between moments and things, and because we're afraid of space, which is precisely what we need for healing to take place, and for a more

positive life to occur, we avoid letting go of our suffering. And so our compulsive life continues, because we're so afraid of space.

So, let's talk a little bit about this next very far-out piece of our journey, which is really quite an amazing journey. I hope we will get through the third node today, at least through some of it. During the guided meditation at the beginning of the session, I asked you to imagine Manjushri, or Sheer Brilliance, as the ideal, and to imagine him sending a duplicate of himself to you and then you dissolved, that is your ordinary self dissolves. And you become more like Manjushri. Once that happens, once you've become like a budding Manjushri, a nascent altruist, you've sort of managed to maintain your openness and clarity of mind to the point where you can envision that you are a Buddha as you are coming out of the death phase of your old self, and you hold on to that cognitive dissonance, to the illusion, or it seems to be an illusion, that maybe you're a Buddha ... and there you are!

Next, how do you go from that Buddha vision to firming up the vision, to being a Buddha and having a fully evolved life based on this new identity as an altruist? There is a very beautiful and elegant teaching for that. You hear the call of the wisdom goddesses. That call is a song, a beautiful song, a song that pulls on your heart strings and elicits your compassion. This is necessary because if you stay in the subtle form, where you're a Buddha in your own mind only, in the privacy of your own esthetic experience, you may not be very helpful to other people. The call of the wisdom goddesses is a call of necessity from the

world around you, the call of suffering that is saying, "We really need some buddhas around here, where are you, when are you showing up, are you here already?" When you hear that call, it's like your heart melts. Actually, the call triggers a response of unconditional love and compassion. Your sense of separateness from "the other," from the one who is calling you, dissolves.

You imagine dissolving as the Manjushri that you just made, you dissolve again, into pure space, and in this case it's the space of unconditional love and compassion. And so you are getting ready to come back in earnest, as embodied altruism, as a fully-fledged, fully developed altruist. You go through the usual dissolution process. And when your body reappears as Manjushri and lights from your heart go out, the wisdom goddesses are invited and come with vases full of bliss and love nectar, and they pour it over you. The nectar flows into your system like a blissful stream and melts you inside. This seals you, anoints you in the same way as a child who is being baptized, or a king or a queen, or a prophet. It confirms, in an official way, that now you are Sheer Brilliance, you're officially a genius, you're officially a Buddha. It's a consecration, a pronouncement from all the enlightened beings in the universe, and they are saying something that can be sort of translated as "By joining this community of altruists may the commitments of all transcendent beings be reaffirmed and shine!" Essentially, you're joining a community that's based on commitment, and the commitment is to become an altruist.

Remember I told you about my two initiations? My first initiation was when I was 18 and in college; and my second was when I was 30 or so. In the initiation you go to the mandala, the lama asks you a question with two parts, and you answer it. The first time I only heard the first part of the question, which is "Who are you and what do you want?" (It's just like in Emerald City at the end of the Yellow Brick Road, right?... ) And then you say, "I'm the lucky one and I want great bliss." I did not hear the second part of the question. When I was 30, I went through the same initiation, and that time I heard the second part: "And what are you going to do with it?" And the answer is, "I'm going to keep the commitments of the buddhas."

This shows you the intent of this practice, the ethical intent, the altruistic intent. You get the equipment for bliss, to be made of blissful openness, to really get over the whole trauma/stress trip and inhabit the triumphant part of our nervous system, that part where our brilliance lies. But there is a mission attached to this: We all need to be heroic, and triumphant, because there's so much work to be done, because there are so many confused people who are blowing things up, and blowing themselves up, and hurting each other, and hurting themselves. If we don't do anything to help, if we don't change to be more helpful, this suffering is going to continue for much longer. When is it going to be over? We don't know, unfortunately we could blow up the planet, the inhabitable part of the planet, before we get there.

So, the re-entry into the community is about becoming an altruist. Isn't that beautiful? We go through a rite of passage, and we're no longer so frightened that we cannot take responsibility for our life and the world. We transition to a heroic place, and then we are ready to take on responsibility, ready to respond to the real situation, and it is one in which we're all interconnected, we're all in it together.

Next, with that goodness sealed in you, and with your recognition as a Buddha, now that you have received your diploma, so-to-speak, now that you have gone through the initiation, you envision that your body has nested heroes within. Your body is the body that is transforming your life, and it is the perfect equipment to manifest a compassionate life, an altruistic life. How do we do that? At your heart, you imagine a small version of you, a mini you that is the mini altruist that represents your speech and your transformation, your development, so that you continue to develop. Sheer Brilliance is there, guiding you. Within his heart there is a sun disk and an exclamation point, or a G syllable, representing your mind and the death awareness, the recognition of space, that all is based on space, all is transparent and really open, all is open form, an open-response form ...

So that's that! Now it's time for real action, now we go into the business of gathering an altruistic community.

Most meditations, even in the tantras, are simpler than this one. They are about one Buddha, one male or female buddha deity, one genius. But in the more advanced forms, there are whole families. Each altruist gathers a community of altruists and they work together as a team. This is how social organizations work, and how the family works as the biological unit of creativity and reproduction. But now we're overriding biological reproduction, and turning it into cultural reproduction: instead of producing another generation, we're producing altruists. We need many crops of altruists.

At that point, you already have the mother and father images, and so you can imagine yourself in a mansion, a home, a palace, and you imagine that you are not just yourself, a male form, but you have your female partner, or you are a female form with a male partner. But it's really you; it's like Jung's two sides, the anima and the animus, the feminine and the masculine, the subjective and the objective. You envision that as you are getting ready to mature, to become an adult. If you remember a few sessions back, I read to you Tsongkhapa's description of the work you go through as part of the creation stage. It is just like in normal life: a person dies and goes through the transition state and then is reborn; and then it has a life and develops, takes a partner and has children and a family, and then dies again. That's also how the creation stage works. But here we are substituting the natural process of the life cycle with a spiritual cycle. And so now that I have matured, now that I am a

full-fledged Buddha, a grown-up Buddha, I am going to be generative and fertile, I am going to make a Buddha family.

To make a family we all need a partner. And so we pull our soul mate out of our psyche, somewhere deep inside. Then we invite the fathers and mothers, and they come and pour nectar on us. The nectar goes down through our central channel. For males it goes to the male phallus, which is visualized as a vajra, a diamond scepter. And for females it goes to the womb and it is visualized as a lotus. We could think of this as a sort of sanitized or cultural reproductive activity. There is an understanding that there's a male essence and a female essence, and they join to form a third, which is essentially a zygote, a fertilized egg cell.

And so you have essentially recreated yourself. You have been born in a mandala, with the help of your teacher. And you have the seeds to create a family. Now you create your own mandala, your own family. You're growing up, you're becoming your own altruist, and you're creating your own spiritual family and community. You envision it happening in the same way that a biological birth happens. You can trick the system with your imagination, to get your life force, your primitive life energy, the energy that has been tied up with this and invested in that, you get that energy going. Out of that a seed syllable of G for "genius" appears inside the mandala, in the womb, and it sends out light. But it does not have to be a G, it doesn't matter what syllable it is. What matters is that light goes out from the syllable to the universe, as an offering to all enlightened



beings, helping all unenlightened beings. The light comes back in the form of many heroic altruists and wisdom mothers, who dissolve into the syllable in me, and then the syllable splits into 10 parts. (It can be another number, but let's just say 10 for the time being.) The 10 parts place themselves around the palace, and they arrange themselves neatly. The mother and father are at the center, and the offspring are in the ordinal and cardinal directions, lined up as male, female, male, female ... It's a family, there are ten of you now ...

All this is happening in miniature, in the womb. And just as you can see and watch the development of a child in an ultrasound, you can also watch this development taking place inside you. So you and your partner are at the center, you draw the seeds up to your heart, and then you shoot them out into the places where they belong in your own little mandala palace. And so you're giving birth now. They're being born, only they're not born out of a womb, they're born out of your heart – or in some versions they're born out of your mouth. Remember, this is a cultural reproduction, it's part of a spiritual cycle, so there is no physical or biological reproduction. In this case you're reproducing agencies, or capacities, around you. And so you get your team, a team to help and support you in your life and work as an altruist. And you feel well integrated with this team, you feel how you are all of one mind, you operate as one mind, just like the different fingers of one hand.

You actually imagine seeing yourself from this position, looking at the mandala from over here, seeing it from over there, and from all directions. Each

segment of the mandala has a different color, a color that comes from each of the five sets of male and female, mother and father geniuses, because each couple has its own color -- white, yellow, green, red, blue ... but that doesn't matter. What's important is that they're recognized as distinct, each set with its own, slightly specialized, work. And then you all share a meal, a meal of offerings you have made, offerings of blissful elixir and sweet meats that represent the chemistry of bliss and enlightenment. And in this way we share bliss and enlightenment. This is like the ritual of communion in Christian mass.

There are examples of the sweet meats in Tibet House, in the Shrine Room; they are the three sculptures that sit at the front of the altar. They are made of complicated shapes that represent the nervous system, where the chakras lie. The nervous system is what supports bliss.

Now that you've been reborn and you've all had dinner, you get to work. You work on improving and perfecting the world around you. There is not much down time. Light beams radiate from the hearts of each of these 10 altruists, going to different layers and segments of living beings in the world out there, and bringing light and life to them. And that transforms and heals them. Then they go back into your heart. As you're doing this visualization you're saying the affirmation, "May we all be pure genius!" which is our version of the Manjushri affirmation. As you repeat the affirmation you imagine lights flowing out of your heart and to all living beings, transforming them into geniuses. They send back duplicates of themselves that melt into the light that melts into you heart ...

You can see how this is a very affirmative exercise of the vision of having a community of altruists that helps transform the world by transforming others. And then you repeat the sequence, but this time in miniature. At the heart of each of these beings there is a mini mandala. They send out lights to all living beings ... And you go on, at the microscopic level. Why? It's sort of subliminally preparing you for the fact that, in our transformation, we have to go underneath the surface, there's work to do at the microscopic level, work for transforming energy and chemistry. This helps to prepare you to understand the subtext. But you really have to get to work at a chemical, energy, molecular level. You're going for full transformation, the transformation of your very fabric. You need that kind of radical transformation in order to develop the capacity to teach and enlighten others, to enliven their nervous systems.

If you want to learn more about this you can look it up in my book, where I talk about the different stages in greater detail. But for now you are not going into so much in your own practice. You start simple and then you will adopt elements that prepare you for the fuller practice. The main point is to understand that this is not just about you and your healing, which would be enough in and of itself. This is also preparing you for a completely different life, one where you have a different relationship with people, and an active and dynamic involvement with transforming the world around you.

This is not sitting meditation; this is meditation in action. And it's political. It's a socio-political practice of one person at a time, one community at a time, and so on, leading to a grassroots transformation of the world. It reminds me of Jeff Rubin's comment about transforming the world. We often despair when we watch CNN. You start to think, "Oh dear, all these terrible things happening, far away, and I can't do anything about it. I'm just a helpless, powerless child. I can only despair." That is one answer to that. Another one is what we are learning here: "No, I choose not to despair. I am a powerful living being, I am a Buddha being!

Just as Buddha transformed our planet, Christ transformed the planet, Confucius transformed the planet ... many people transformed the planet for the better. And they were just human beings, like me ... " The best solution is to really empower ourselves to realize our enormous potential to make a difference in our own lives and in the world around us. And so the purpose of developing a positive movie, a positive narrative for our lives, is to overcome the negative movie and be the best we can be. Otherwise, how could you help, especially in this day and age, globally connected and constantly bombarded, inundated, with endless amounts of information, most of it useless, and a lot of it very negative? How could we not feel small, helpless, and powerless?

And so Jeff Rubin, who is a Zen psychoanalyst -- and a very Zen guy, he was at one of Nalanda's benefits, some of you may remember him -- was talking about his work to a CNN contributor. The guy said to him, "This is really great stuff,

I'm really excited about it. Now, how are you going to scale up, get it out in the world so that people know about it?" And Jeff asked him, very nicely, "Has anyone made a significant difference in your life?" He thought for a moment, "Yep." Jeff asked him then, "Were they using a megaphone?..." The point is that we are more strongly influenced by another human being than anything else. Another human being is the most powerful instrument for change. But we don't think of ourselves as powerful instruments for change. We think of ourselves as the bottom drawer of all the change that's going on around us. But that is our child thinking, that's our traumatized childlike way of seeing ourselves. The reality, according to this tradition, is that we humans are amazing creatures. So wake up to this reality, and use what nature gave you to make the world a better place. It will be good for you. It will be good for the world. And it will be a lot more fun, a lot more interesting and a lot better than being helpless and powerless.

We come to insights like this one and we think, "Isn't this beautiful stuff?..." The classes have a sort of mental transport system. But then we go home and we're back to thinking, "Oh my God, I have to pay my bills, I have to get from here to there, I have to do all this ..." And so my life feels very small and limited, again! This practice challenges us, it asks, "Are you sure that you're stuck and helpless, that you can't be more effective, that you don't have the power to transform yourself and the world, are you so sure of that? You meditate on that, in this way. And when you do you feel it: "Oh, ok, why not? Let me transform!"

When I went to India for the first time and I saw the enormous poverty, all these people live in conditions as if it were 2000 years ago ... Even in my mother's town in Sicily they started getting cars and bathrooms and things like that way back when. When you really see such poverty you realize "Oh my God, I'm not just an ordinary person, I'm like a prince. I've got all these opportunities. Maybe it wasn't a perfect childhood and maybe I've had misery and confusion and all those things, but between what I could do with my life, and what these folks picking wheat beside the road could do with theirs, there is really an enormous difference."

And that, I think, was the most important thing I learned in India. That's why I went back to medical school. Because these experiences empower you, you feel you can actually do what you thought was impossible. That's also part of the challenge of this kind of practice: to inspire us to doubt our known self, and instead of reacting to the narrow small-minded fears and concerns, like guilt and shame, that we normally feed ourselves, we now open radically, and we get used to that radical vision of ourselves, and feed it to ourselves on a regular basis, just like we feed Miracle Grow to our plants.

## Chapter Fourteen

### Sealing and Realizing the Transformation: Consistency & Dedication

We have been exploring the Hero's Journey for a few chapters now. It is never too late to get on the Hero's Journey, to finding clarity within you and transforming your life. And we are now in the reflective post-phase. I thought we could use some more review -- we might say each meditation is an intuitive review, which is the way this tradition teaches. It goes right in, under your radar. It influences you, but not necessarily in the same discursive way that other forms of teaching, including contemplative or spiritual, might.

To review, what we do when we meditate in this way is that we sort of rehearse the first six steps of the hero's transformation process. We start with the three preliminaries --positive motivation, wisdom and security. We call them "preliminaries" because they are the steps to preparing our minds to let go of negativity, tune in to connectivity, and open up, so that we can recognize confusion and steer our way through it. And then we went through the three conversions.

At the start of each meditation, we rehearse generating a *positive motivation*, to be at peace within ourselves, to be a more liberated being, to be a clearer and freer being. And then we sort of revive, or sharpen our understanding of our natural potential for insight, for *wisdom*, so that we can open our minds and see through the forms that act like blinders, that baffle our

minds. Then comes *safety*: we establish a safety area with those two preliminaries in hand, and in connection with our mental archetype, our portable teacher, always available, always online as long as we use our imagination properly, effectively. The connection with the teacher is such that we get this sense of "Gee, my teacher is only as far as my imagination!" This is a lovely feeling. And it's part of the purpose of this practice. In the presence of our teacher we feel a sense of greater safety and solidarity. This forms a sort of firewall, a net or a web of total safety and security, and provides the kind of confidence that we know we can really rely on. When we're connected with our mentor we are reminded -- we *know* -- that we need to rely on our care and compassion for ourselves and the world, and on our radical open-mindedness and clarity about ourselves in our world. These conditions are our ultimate protection.

We set up a firewall to protect us against confusion, so that we're not confused into thinking that our anger, or our fear, or something like that, can provide reliable protection. Now we're clear that it's the positive motivations, like the wish to help, or the wish to connect in a helpful way, and clarity, a radical and creative clarity of mind, that are going to protect us; they are the elements of our mind that are the right tools for moving towards civilized living, towards our sustainable happiness.

Then we briefly rehearse what's traditionally called the three-fold conversion process. This is not a religious conversion, here what you are



converting is your life story. "Revision," in a way, is a more appropriate translation than "conversion," although it is not strong enough, because "revision" also can be used for minor changes. "Transformation" is better, it's deeper, and here we are talking about totally taking your life story and putting a whole new story in its place. as we were going through the three conversions we talked about how this practice allows you to use your mind for transformation much more fully. You can use not only your normal waking state mind, which is the mind that most people meditate from and live from, what most of us think of as "me" and "I'm sort of awake here ..." but also other states of consciousness that we normally just pass through without any awareness, like your dissolved, deep-sleep mind, which is like the near-death mind, and also like the orgasm mind. This is a formless, very primal part of the mind that we can use in the process of recreating ourselves.

We recreate ourselves by going through the death process, practicing the eight-step dissolution meditation. You will recall that, in the meditation today, you visualized Manjushri, and then you imagined yourself melting into Manjushri. You are melting element by element, one element into the next, from earth to water and so on, and you come into this place where your ordinary sense of ownership of your body – the sense we all have that "this is my body, I know what my body is" -- is gone.

I lost this sense when I went to medical school. For anatomy, when I went first in the anatomy lab and looked at a poor cadaver, I quickly got out of there.

I figured I could use my anatomy atlas instead, that would be a lot more civilized way to learn anatomy, looking at pictures and reading descriptions, instead of looking at the real thing. Then there was histology. Here you get to look at the human body at the cellular level, as a cellular structure of the human body. And it gets completely freaky. You look through an electron microscope, you see the electron micrographs of all the things inside your body, and it doesn't look at all like "me!" It doesn't look like any of us, it doesn't look like a person. It looks more like rows of buildings on another planet, with different shapes criss-crossing. Yet that's what we're made of!

You look at the human body from the perspective of basic quantum theory, and the conclusion is that we're mostly space, because we're made of matter and matter is made of molecules and molecules are made of atoms which are mostly space, which means we're a sort of a space structure. Then you get even more freaked out, you don't know what your body is anymore, you have joined the ranks of Schrödinger and Bohm and all those people in quantum mechanics.

Here we are using the part of our mind that doesn't feel like what we normally think of as a person, meaning living matter made of some very special clay, so that it looks like a solid thing with a head, two arms and two legs. Here we go into a more subtle experience of the body, not at the physical level but at the energy level, and I have an energetic experience of personhood, what is referred to as the "self of selflessness" -- which is a very cool notion, think about it

-- or, more simply, the clear-light mind. This is the extremely subtle mind. We want to free our minds of their attachment to this formal sense of self, the self we see when we look in the mirror. And we stretch out our identity, we tap into this undifferentiated state, and we think, "Well, maybe I'm also this formlessness ... And if I am formless, I can free myself of old forms and recreate myself with new ones!" This is converting death, or the process of losing our ordinary sense of self, into liberation, liberation from our ordinary sense of self. What follows is an openness, a freedom that we use to convert the afterlife, or the transition between our loss of self and our reemergence into a new self. A new identity emerges for a new experience, and we convert that into a path of generating a new dream life. And that's what we do next.

You know how in dreams you can think of yourself not quite like a person, you're forming, sort of, in funny ways, and maybe you think you're over here, or over there ... The relationship between subject and object is fuzzy, you're not sure if this one is you, or that other one is you. Likewise, in the reemerging phase of this practice you shift shapes and forms and light, and then, suddenly, you become a person, or something like a person, but not the person you normally think you are. It's your dream personality, your dream body. And, once again, if you have done this practice with awareness and you've chosen wisely, this new person you have chosen really represents your highest ideals of compassion and wisdom, wisdom made of the intuitions of clarity, discernment, empathy and

connectedness. These are the best raw materials within you to build this new self, this ideal self.

When I do my meditation, I do this and then I sort of improvise, using the tradition but in a way that is less spelled-out. I go back through my life, and in particular through the moments of clarity -- we all have those moments, when we experience little illuminations, spots of clarity, maybe when we were little -- and we noticed how the people around us were acting crazy, but we suddenly saw clearly, "Oh, those people are freaking out, but I don't have to, I can look at the sky instead, I can enjoy this tree, ..." We suddenly experience that we have this potential of mind to be separate, and we have these moments of illumination, of total clarity. Most of us have those moments throughout our lives. But we sort of treat them as noise.

Because of our addiction to negativity we thread our sense of self through memories that are traumatic and upsetting, memories of feeling small and abandoned, and we think that that's who we really are: "That's who I really am, I am not this luminous translucent being who had that experience, then that other experience ..." When I'm trying to re-emerge, for example when I wake up in the morning, or in my meditation, one thing I find very helpful is to rethread my sense of identity through positive experiences and get the feeling for what they were like. It's a very interesting exercise, give it a try. Normally we feel like "Gee, why has life become so difficult when it was so nice when I was a child?" Of course, that's selective memory, right?

In reality, if you use your imagination and you go back in time, those moments of clarity are still there, those positive feelings are still in our mind, and they're still accessible. But they're not quite connected, they're not hooked up to our normal identity system. That system has organized itself around fear and suffering, obligation, stress and worry. Now it's up to us to rewire our system, connect the positive experiences and thread them together into a new way of being, a way that personifies the best in us. This is what this art teaches us. It gives us the permission and the courage to do it, it says to us, "You can really re-sculpt yourself, you have all the raw materials you need in your mind and body, you just put them together like this ..." And you start, you put things together that way and you wind up as the person you want to be, living the life that you want to live.

In meditation we go through the eight dissolutions into the clear light mind, which is the way to turn death into a pathway to transformation, a transition to rebirth and to a heroic life. Then we transform the transition stage into a path to embody joy, the joy of living free, free from stress and trauma, free from the straightjacket made of the stressed mentality and the stressed nervous system, and reborn as this abundantly creative being. Manjushri, the archetype that we've been using in this exercise, represents the male form of this notion of abundant creativity. He is also known as Manjugosha, "the poet with a gentle voice," which means that he is not just a poet but also the best therapist, because he knows how to talk to each of us in just the right way, in the

language and the sound of voice that we need to hear, that we are open to hear. And we all have that capacity.

We transform the transition stage into a path to personifying the joy of our creative nature, of our creative freedom, our ability to find the qualities within us that really are helpful to build a dream life. Then, finally, we transform life itself, into a developed life, a life that is mature, fruitful, a life on a path of manifesting altruism and compassion. This is just a natural thing that we recognize when we get out of our own little myopic freakout episodes. We recognize that we live in a world with other living beings and we're all suffering, we're all trapped in the same little prison, freaking out and breaking down together. At this point it's natural to start thinking, not only about how I can free myself, but also how I engage with the world around me, creatively, to transform it so that everyone can get on this path with me. Now it is clear, now we are aware that we can't make this ideal new life alone, we need a community -- and that community needs a larger community, and so on.

Now we are ready to embody and fully develop a sense of altruistic involvement, we are ready to get involved in building a community. We went over that last chapter: we talked about giving birth to a community, a spiritual birth, by planting seeds in the relationships with others around us, and then they bear fruit, in their own process of transformation, that is in creating an altruistic community that together can make waves, change the world. That's how this goes. This process isn't just about personal liberation. It has a ripple effect, a

chain reaction, and maybe even a tidal wave -- and that's what's called turning ordinary life into a path to manifesting perfect altruism, or altruistic genius.

So, in each meditation we review those six essential points of the transformation process: setting the stage with the three preliminaries, for the crucible where we're going to transform our life story, and then actually transforming our life story by taking the three nodes of death, development, and birth. We go through the three big nodes of a life story, we recreate them, in a radically new story, in the same way that somebody who has a near-death experience, or some other very profound mind-altering experience, reviews life and ends up transformed. Hopefully every day we have some experience along those lines. It may start like a glimmer, where we suddenly see, "Oh, it really doesn't have to be this way, I don't really have to be this person, I don't have to experience or meet the world in this way. It could be some other way ..."

This practice is used as a kind of scaffolding, with a film script to guide our re-creation, our re-production of the movie of our lives. And if we recreate the movie of our lives we're actually recreating our lives, because what we're doing now in our minds will reorient us in the real world. Now that we are following a different script and a different vision, our behavior is altered, and so is our life, the life we create now.

That's the process that we've been going over in these past chapters. We can also review the whole practice and go a bit more deeply into it during weekend retreats. Our mission for this chapter is a little more modest, or so it

would seem, and in a way it's much more practical. We will go over the two concluding steps. One is *rehearsing*: rehearsing the altruist's life every day and whenever we do this practice, and finding ways to weave that altruism into our ordinary life as ordinary Janes and Joes getting through the day, trying not to freak out or get hurt, trying to pay the bills. We weave those two takes on life together. The other concluding step is *sealing*, sealing the practice so that it lasts over time, so that the good of it stays protected from the elements of confusion and decay. For those of you that want to dig deeper into this, you can look it up at my book on Sustainable Happiness.

In this and in the next chapter we're going to talk about the actual practice. We will go over a visualization meditation, and we will break it down step by step, talk about it at each step of the way, what each line is doing, and what each text block is about. For some of us, using visualization in meditation is new. Most of us think of meditation as mindfulness practice, watching our breath or emptying our minds or saying a mantra. That's weird enough. But now we go into another practice that maybe somebody said we should try, one that is more far out, that goes much deeper. So we're trying it. We are actually using this practice to totally re-envision our view of reality, our identity and our place in the world.

What is this all really about and how does it actually work, how does it change us? There are four key points to the practice, four key ingredients. They are *constancy, cognitive dissonance, acceptance and dedication*. The first two



points, constancy and cognitive dissonance, are relevant to *rehearsing* the ideal life, to the meditations for rehearsing your potential to lead an altruistic life. The last two points, acceptance and dedication, deal with how to *seal the practice*, and protect it from the corrosive forces of ordinary life, forces like mindlessness, afflictions and so on.

Constancy is key. Constancy binds this practice together with our relationship with our chosen guide, our ideal; or to a community, a reference community, a community that is our reference point. Here we are, we're cultural beings on this planet, and since we're a global society now, there are many different cultures that we can choose to identify with. At present we have already identified with ours. What's next? Is there a better culture, a better community, one that can help us find a way to live in this world that is actually liberating, transformative? That is not our Western culture, not really. While our culture has done some amazing things with matter, it has not been so good with the mind.

Actually, Western culture is a bit confused in the mind department. And we can forget about the spirit, or ethics, or the soul department. Although we have very rich traditions, including many spiritual, ethical and philosophical traditions, our everyday life has become further and further separated from them. We have drifted further and further away from religious traditions. Traditional churches are closing every week, even though we now have a groovy Pope, he may not be quite enough to turn the trend around. On the

other hand, a growing trend is yoga, yoga centers are opening everywhere. And soon, along with them, there will be meditation centers, which are already on the rise in many cities around the world. Why? Because they are part of the world of spirituality. It's not like you just go to church or synagogue and do your ritual once a week, or once a day, which can be a wonderful thing. But this is different. It is an attempt to bring peace, with the active ingredients of a contemplative life, into dialog with our everyday life, a life that at this time in the twenty-first century is not very peaceful or spiritual, or relies in any way on the development of the mind.

The tools in this kind of practice are important; they are designed to be imported into a life and a world that this tradition describes as poisonous, or toxic, poisoned by vice, and by all the afflictions. You can certainly see that. We look at our world, and we see terrorism, we see the awful things that are happening all around. We see this every day, just watch CNN any morning. I'm horrified when my children are awake when CNN is on. For CNN it's like every morning is an opportunity for trauma. There are terrible things happening in the world. And many people all around believe that part of the reason for so much violence is because we have moved so far from our spiritual traditions, even though spiritual and religious freedom has given us the freedom to move into the world with incredible advances in material development.

We humans have developed the world into a comfortable place for us, and that is working pretty nicely. I think that's a wonderful thing, but it's not all

there is to life, a comfortable and pleasant external setting. There is also an inside. Once you're in that world that's comfortable and works nicely, what are you thinking? what are you feeling? what are you doing there? what's your purpose? That is the part that we have lost along with the spiritual traditions. This practice is designed specifically to bring the monastery into everyday life.

As you imagine, when you're in dialog with a teacher, there's that sense of commitment, a commitment to this person, to the ideal that this person represents, to the image of the archetype, the hero that we're envisioning as a shared ideal: "We both believe, my teacher and I, that we all have this natural brilliance, and that we need to develop it in order for the planet to be happy. We share that ideal and we also share our commitment to that ideal, and that commitment keeps us together, it is the basis of our bond. (57:47). Together, my mentor and I are putting our lives on the line to make the ideal we share a reality. So there are at least two of us, committed to find our sheer brilliance and see what we can do with it. And then maybe we'll help other people do that, find their brilliance, and help larger communities that are willing to do that. And maybe we will join other communities that are also following these ideals, but in different ways.

The essence of the commitment -- the constancy -- is not actually to the practice, it's to the people who practice. You make the commitment when you get one of these teachings, like the one that Gelek Rinpoche gave us, on the Medicine Buddha. You should all do this, have the experience, it's like going on

a field trip. You will get a feel for what the ritual, the culture, is like. And it's interesting. The point is that, when you take one of these initiations, what it really is about is having an experience that leads to a contract. And the contract is: "I'm going to practice this art." That's your side of the contract. On the mentor's side the contract is "I'm going to help you practice." It's a simple thing. And if you want to look at it in a more elaborate way, the mentor's commitment is, "I'm going to help you transform your nervous system and develop the capacity to be blissfully open, blissfully free and clear." There is also an ethical side to the contract. And that is, we are doing this because we're trying to be the best we can be, we are trying to become the most effective beings that we can so that we can transform the world.

There's one Christian tradition that I know of that is very similar to this one, and there are probably many more. The one that I know of is St. Ignatius of Loyola's set of exercises for training priests to envision themselves as Christ walking through the Gospel scenes. It's really pretty much the same thing. You're trying to imagine what would it have been like to be Christ in the Gospels, you use your imagination to simulate the experience in order to get closer to the intention, the mindset, of that other being. Whatever our feelings about religion may be, we all recognize how people like Christ, and Buddha, and Confucius, made a difference. And so, if we want to make a difference, wouldn't it be a good idea to run our lives by these people, and ask them how they did it? But normally, for Christians, it's sort of a sin to think that we can be very much like

Christ. Somehow, the Jesuits got away with it. Maybe they did because they were the agents of The Counter-Reformation – but I'm not going to go into that part of Western history. The point is that those exercises may explain how they became such a strong force, a force to reckon with. I suspect it was because this type of practice expanded their normal sense of efficacy. They were not ordinary people. They were sort of emanations, or imitations, of Christ, who was a very effective person.

This is like the white coat syndrome, one version of it. When you go to medical school, you learn about cells and molecules, and many other things about the body. Then you graduate and you get the white coat. And you go to the hospital. At this point you know nothing, you can't do much, and you hear someone say to you, "Doctor, what do we do?" And you turn around, you look at the older residents and you say, "What do we do?..." And, somehow, when you put that white coat on you feel it, you feel its mantel of responsibility, it makes you feel that more is expected of you -- and you rise to the occasion, you're capable of more! It is quite a phenomenon.

I think somebody did some research on this, and the result seemed to show that if you put people in a white coat and you tell them that they're doctors, their IQ goes up; and if you put people in a white coat and tell them that they're butchers, their IQ goes down. And it's the same coat! So, in the same way, we can increase our IQ by putting on a Manjushri coat. It's like we're adopting a prosthetic identity, we're imagining ourselves as Manjushri, for a few

moments. And it really boosts our sense of self! We start asking ourselves, "Well, what would I do if I were a hero altruist ... maybe I could do this ..." And you go out into the world and do it, or at least do more than you thought yourself capable of. Here constancy becomes relevant: how do you maintain that feeling, that empowered self, when you go out into the world? So far you've been feeling like an ordinary Joe, small and stressed, helpless. How do you maintain that empowered identity? You stay connected to the teacher, you stay connected to the understanding that if the teacher can do it, if that person can do it, maybe you can do it too. And you remind yourself of the commitment you have made to that person. So you have to try, even if it all sounds a bit crazy.

It's the bond with the teacher that really keeps us going. If you start taking this seriously, and you start seeing your potential, your higher potential, you start to see yourself as the equal of your teacher, as a master. This complicates things. It starts to get you a little spooked because you think, "I'm not this." It's like when you are in therapy, and your therapist says, "Maybe you should think about ending our sessions now ..." and you get a bit spooked, suddenly you become much more pathological, and you say, "no, I need at least another five years ..." But if we have the commitment, if we are really committed, that commitment supports our confidence, an unshakable confidence in the connection with the mentor, in the process, and, ultimately, in ourselves.

Another important point is that when you link to your mentor, you're not just linking to a person, because your mentor is also a living representative of a tradition; and most of these traditions go back many hundreds of years. The link to an old tradition, and the community that practices it, supports the confidence, and the constancy, in the practice.

This sounds kind of unfashionable, out of step with our modern era, now that anything that has any value seems to come from innovation, from the future, so-to-speak. Of course, there's plenty of innovation that is garbage, a total waste of time. Buckminster Fuller said that in order to get one real breakthrough you need to put everybody on a lifetime research grant in order to get it, and it's worth it. I agree. The point here is that we put too much value on innovation, at the expense of the old. We don't see that many ancient traditions had a deep understanding of the basics of human life. They may not have had the technology we do. But they knew a lot about what it meant to be a human being on this planet; and how to live well with other human beings. And they knew a lot about the human body and mind.

I was at a conference with one of the Dalai Lama's physicians, at Columbia University a couple of years ago, and he was demonstrating one of the pulse readings used in Tibetan medicine. It's a similar practice to this one, in the sense that it is about using the mind to enhance the intuition, in this case for reading the different pulses. He took this girl's pulse, and from it he could describe a heart problem she had, and in some detail. He said that where she

was born, there was a current of energy that went through her heart and upset the way that the heart was put together. It turned out she had this kind of genetic anomaly that messes up the way the heart's valves and chambers are put together. And he was able to pick that up just by taking her pulse. A diagnosis like that would cost probably upwards of 2,000 dollars in the United States, and it would be the result of complicated lab tests and analyses; they would never be able to make that diagnosis listening to the heartbeat, that knowledge is not here.

So, you see, the mind is a tremendously powerful thing. If we cultivate it we can do amazing things. Building machines is one way to release the power of the mind; and in the West we have been very successful at that. But the most powerful way to release the power of the mind is by training it -- and that's what meditation is about.

We believe in the process of meditation to train our minds. And when we train our minds in this way, we're linking to an ancient tradition. This means that we're really linking to a mind stream, we are tapping into a multi-generational mind stream. In a way that's what the deity, the archetype, represents. The mentor is important, but not most important. We don't visualize the mentor only. Take the example of the Dalai Lama. When you visualize the Dalai Lama he's not alone, he's the latest in a line of 14 Dalai Lamas, one person in a person-to-person continuum, a lineage. And all the while, over those many hundreds of



years of 14 generations, the Dalai Lama has been cultivating certain qualities. And those qualities have been conserved, maintained.

Still, the mentor is very important. It's the same in all professions, all arts. In the work place people always want to know first who you mentor was, or who your mentors were. They want to know who you learned from. Because that is the way human beings learn. We model ourselves on others, on those we admire. And we are part of a lineage. It's just like your physical lineage, your genetic makeup, only now it's mental and you are aware of it.

Constancy is maintained through generations. When you connect with a particular role model, you're connecting with a practice that has been going on for hundreds of years, with the same values, and many of the same methods. So if it has lasted this long it must be offering something good. And, again, it isn't just your mentor that you are connecting with, it's a whole community, made of thousands of people who do the same practice. There's a kind of constancy in that, there are standards that have been built over time, not just something that somebody made up. It is an art form that has real psychological applications. To get the benefit it's important to really get connected to the people, the tradition and the practice. To feel the living presence of that tradition is empowering. And to do that there must be constancy in our practice.

For some reason this makes me think of the movie *Amistad*, which I mentioned before, based on a true story about a slave ship carrying slaves from Africa to America sometime in the 1800s. It was captured and the slaves

petitioned to be freed before the court in Massachusetts. The main character, who was some prince in his own culture back in Africa, explained to the judge, "I am the whole reason why my ancestors existed." This brings up the question of ancestry, of lineage. He was saying that he felt diminished, because his father had been a great man, and where was he, his son, now? A slave. How could he ever live up to his father?

That is the force of tradition, it's like a monkey on your back, making you feel small. But in this case, in this tradition, the notion of lineage is more primal, and more human, and it makes you feel big and powerful, because you feel that you're not just one person, you are representing a whole lineage, many more lives. If you have spent some time looking at some of the traditional images of the deities, you know that they are always surrounded by a lot of other beings. And the fierce deities wear necklaces made of human skulls -- even human heads. This does not mean that they're cannibals. It means that the archetype represents the accumulated effort of hundreds of individuals. That image has been practiced and invested over many hundreds of years. The same is true of any art in this tradition.

You can't make up a religion overnight, you can't make up a science overnight, you can't make up a philosophy overnight. The things that have value last; they are preserved, cultivated and developed. All of that is what constancy is about: you connect to something bigger than yourself, and you feel, "This is good, this can empower me."

Next is *dissonance*. Dissonance is more interesting, and more complicated, in some ways. Most of us experience dissonance when we try this practice. You know that this is a very weird experience, a little bit like an acid trip. You go through this meditation and you imagine yourself dissolving, then you are reborn as a divine form, then hopefully some interesting things happen while you are still in that state of consciousness, and then you close it up, you close your meditation, you close up shop, you go out into the world and you are the same person you were before and everything seems the same. This creates a cognitive dissonance: if I had that experience in the meditation room where I felt like Manjushri, like Shear Brilliance, why do I go back to the world where I'm just ordinary Joe, again? Which one is the real me? Will the real me please stand up?

We all have experienced some dissonance with meditation in general. This dissonance becomes more intense when we're working like this with our self image and our self concept. I think here we need to understand the binary nature of the human mind. From the Buddhist point of view, in the first place we think we know who we are, we think we know what we are, and we don't, not really. We think we know who we are because, somehow, we have been given ownership over this body and mind, and we identify with them. But we have no clear idea of what this body and mind can do. The relevant question is, given the social, cultural and other resources that are accessible to this body and mind, what could it actually do if it wasn't governed by me, if it was governed

by something or someone more enlightened, more effective? The answer is, obviously, quite a lot more.

Our normal binary minds lead us to believe that we know what we are; when we meditate we tend to attach that sense of reification, that excessive realism, to a deity, or maybe we develop a sense of identification like, "Oh, maybe I'm god ... or maybe I'm a genius ... maybe I'm Superman ...I'm the bravest!" I know that most people have to try hard to get experiences like that. Let's just say that we all have those experiences. Then you start working on the problem of "Which is the real me?"

From a Buddhist point of view, neither is the real me, not the genius and not the ordinary me. They are both wrong perceptions. The virtue of this newly created self, what I call a prosthetic self, the archetypal self, is that from the beginning, unlike the normal ego that we create in confusion and in fear as children and with a child's mind, it is a self chosen with clarity of mind. That's really awesome, think about it: we're children when we plant the foundations for our life. Those foundations are filled with confusion, a child's confusion, and that sets up all sorts of distortions. But now, this time is different. Now, from the beginning, we are building a self, this divine self, this Buddha self, with adult, mature clarity.

This clarity is realized in many ways. First, we need to develop *divine pride*. We need the recognition that the image of the deity, of the ideal, the archetype, is not the real thing, it is not the real deity, or the ideal, or the

archetype. It is just a mentally constructed image, and so it is translucent and transparent. The real thing is about a way of being, a realization, a certain intuition that we may not have had yet.

When we do this practice we do two things: first, we build this amazing image of ourselves that we don't identify with in a normal way, and we see ourselves as amazing beings in amazing bodies and surroundings, and as part of a community that is doing amazing things. We envision that with perfect clarity and as vividly as we can, so vividly that it feels as if we were sitting in the middle of it. Then, we think about how empty all this is, this image is just a mental construction, and a simulation: "I am using a mental image, an image that is defined by and dependent on cultural conventions -- conventions of art and conventions of language, for example -- and so this image cannot be the real guru, it cannot be the real thing, it's just a construction dependent on its cultural base ..."

We meditate on it in that way and we try to come into a place where we're able to hold those two things together. So, we're sort of experiencing, "Wow, this is my deep-sleep mind ... when I free my mind from its governor, the straightjacket of self, then I realize that I have a totally selfless self, I have a totally expanded and perhaps omniscient, or anyway a very open and objective consciousness. That's my real self, that's my Buddha self. But, for the benefit of other people, so that they can find me, I have an address and an identity, I dress up in the costume of Manjushri, so that it seems like people can

see me, so that they can recognize me ..." We meditate on Manjushri as a way to train ourselves to communicate an experience that is not bounded by any symbol, an experience of total freedom.

The advantage of this kind of practice is that, if done right, it's a self-dissolving practice, a practice to dissolve ourselves, which leads us to a kind of freedom, freedom from self forms, freedom from identity, freedom from content. And it is a freedom to play with, because it is not just a freedom *from*, it's also a freedom *to*, to create new identities for a freer and more effective life. Maybe we build a new identity for every person we have to talk to; or for every day, or week, or whatever works for us. And we have to work with what's good in us. This is the way now, now we're really becoming masters of the art of Buddha identity, of Buddhafication! In reality, of course, we all have had a little Buddha experience ourselves, even if only a very brief one. This is an experience of freedom and clarity, of freedom from suffering and affliction and confusion. And that's what the real medicine is, the real motor under the hood. We can tap into that freedom, it is part of that self that we create, that is self-dissolving, transparent, and therefore it is safe. And it is different.

The dissonance here is that, if we're doing it right, most of the time our ordinary personality will feel more real to us than this divine personality. We'll have more of a sense like, "Oh that is just something I try at times." You may have flashes, or glimpses, of "Oh, maybe I am that, maybe that's the real me ..." But you'll still go back to being your ordinary self, being ordinary Joe. And,

gradually, something will start to change, something will happen gradually, something very interesting. The ordinary self will start to dematerialize, it will become less solid. Why? Because, if you're practicing, this practice supports a gradual de-reifying and dematerializing identity. That process carries over to your ordinary personality. It brings a very nice feeling, it allows you to take yourself more lightly. Now you are able to see through yourself, to get out of yourself. You look in the mirror and you don't see your ordinary self all the time. Something has opened up. Now, at times, you can see space, or light, or a Buddha smile, or something else, of this sort. And so there's a liberation of your mind. This liberation brings fearlessness with it, and tolerance.

To benefit from this practice in this way you have to develop a tolerance for this cognitive dissonance, this dissonance between the self built through this practice (which seems kind of artificial and weird, and maybe too culturally specific) and the ordinary self with an ordinary life, and nobody knows about your practice. And maybe if they did they'd think that you're kind of crazy, that you joined a cult, something like that. You have to maintain that duality. This is not so unusual, when you think of it. If you are an artist, or a mathematicians, or a psychotherapist, most people can't understand many of the things that you do. But that doesn't mean that you, or they, are not grounded or real. We share some things with some people, and with some communities. In the same way we may not share this practice with most people, but there is a community we can share it with.

I think that the easiest way to tolerate the dissonance is by oscillating between the two identities. We start out on a very binary mode: "If I'm Buddha, I must really be Buddha; and if I'm Joe I must really be Joe." Then, you start to question: "Well, if I'm the Buddha, what does that mean? Where is the Buddha that I'm becoming?" And then we come back to Joe: "And where's the Joe? What is Joe worried about?" You go back and forth between the two, and the oscillation becomes smaller and smaller. Pretty soon after we develop a very different way of relating to selfhood; it feels like the self just doesn't trap us as much anymore. Our identity becomes less and less rigid. We become clearer, and freer, and lighter about everything, about who people think we are, and who we think we are. It's very liberating.

I have a client, a meditation practitioner, who recently had a stem cell transplant. And it went very well. But before the procedure he was very frightened about what the experience was going to be like. I said to him, "Think about it as a rebirth experience, as if your old self is dying. The procedure is actually killing off stuff, so this isn't a total metaphor. If the procedure is about replacing your own cells with someone else's, cells of a better brand, a better immune system, you're becoming something like a bionic creature. Think of that as a journey of self-transformation, an opportunity for you to transform and become a less self-reifying or self-centered or afflicted person. Now you're becoming a more open and interconnected person. Embrace that process ..."

And so he did. And he found that helpful.



That made me think that, in a way, this process of meditating for building a new sense of self is a sort of transplant, of a new identity, a new selfhood, into you. I like transplants. But there are two problems you can run into with them. One is graft rejection. That would be like having a half-way practice, maybe you do this meditation once or twice, or maybe for years but not very seriously, and then at a certain point you get to a place where you feel, "Well what is this Tibetan thing, this ritual, this sort of cult-like religious ritual? What does that have to do with anything?" And you stop and go back to being Joe. "That was just like a thing, it just happened, or a phase ..."

The second problem is a graft-versus-host reaction. The graft tissue starts to attach to the host tissue, so much so that it takes over, and you start to think, "I'm not really Joe. I'm really Manjushri, so much smarter than Joe, Joe should just keep quiet and just let me do the talking!" And so you split off from your ordinariness and from your ordinary relationships. That can get wacky and sick too. So, for this process to work, you can't get too attached or stay too unattached.

Then we come to the last step of the practice, and that is rehearsing the transformation process in everyday life. We will talk about this in more depth next week. We'll talk about regular meditation practice – every day or every week or a couple of times a week -- and the practice in between meditations, for moving forward on the transformation path with balance, without becoming too identified with and attached to it, or questioning it too much.

Then we go through the process of closing the meditation. We close all kinds of meditations in the same way, in two steps: *acceptance*, with forgiveness; and *dedication*. Both steps are intended to help us stay in the practice -- keep our teeth in it, so to speak -- over time. The process of closing the mediation is like canning preserves. When you make preserves you start with good berries, or cherries, and you cook them nicely. Then, when you finish cooking, you take out the sticks and thorns, the pits and so on, all the stuff that would take away from the quality of the preserves. Then, to finish, you put the preserves in mason jars and you seal the jars.

In your meditation, the raw fruit, your raw material, is your good motivation, and a good body and mind. With that you practice meditation, which is like cooking up your raw materials. As you practice you recognize the things you could have done better, which are the pits and thorns in the preserves. You mentally note them, and you remove them, you take them out of the process: "Oh that wasn't so great. That wasn't what I was supposed to do." That is confession. Confession is an important part of the practice: you recognize, and you also forgive, whatever wasn't so great in what you did: "It's over now, it was a mistake, and so I will correct it; or, if there's nothing I can do about it, I will just let it be." You pray to your archetype, "Please may I be forgiven for everything I've omitted or committed."

For acceptance, you pay special attention to the image, and you note when your meditation is on track and when it's off. You do a self-editing of your

life story, in connection with and guided by the tradition and the mentoring practice. You are going to constantly improve your understanding and your ability to use this art form. You're going to constantly become stronger. This is part of *acceptance*: you accept that this is an on-going transformation. Your life is not about completing a final work of art; it's about continuing in the process of learning how to use your imagination to transform your way of being, in your body and mind. There is now an open dialog between you and the tradition. And in acceptance you are saying "Ok, I realize I didn't do the right thing ..."

Acceptance is not like "I'm guilty, shame on me, I have to go back to square one." It's "I realize that I was off on that ... " This is important, for you and for the tradition, it keeps the tradition from degrading, according to them. And so now you are in constant observation and acceptance of your limitations. "I'm not really there yet, I didn't do that very well ..." With that awareness and that approach you are keeping a higher standard of practice, and you're keeping true to the tradition. Also, it's important to keep your sense of acceptance of your own limitations in what is really going on here — which is, "I am really trying to recreate myself."

*Dedication* is more important, because it seals in the goodness. You dedicate as you say in your practice that whatever positive comes out of your practice, whatever insights or experiences you have in this process, you are going to use them for building the ideal being that you want to be. By doing

that, you are dedicating yourself not just to a path of practice, or to the original intentions, but also to the commitments of a tradition, of a lineage. And that includes an ongoing renegotiating and re-refreshing of your commitment to your teacher: "This is what I'm trying to do. I'm really trying to transform myself using this practice, I'm not just messing around." In that way you are committing to becoming that ideal way to be: "I am committed to finding my sheer brilliance, and I am building solidarity with all the other living beings that are trying to do this, whether it's in this tradition or in some other tradition." You are developing a sense that "it's not just about me, it's about all of us, we're all doing this together." And that can protect you from losing your motivation.

Acknowledging your weaknesses keeps you from getting jaded about the practice, and from degrading the practice until there's almost nothing left, and your feeling towards it becomes "Oh, it's just like everything else." Dedicating your practice also keeps you from drifting away from the intentions, the commitment to the tradition that gave you these tools.

Someone asked me, "What is the difference between Joe and Buddha Joe?" The answer is, I'm still working on it, and I feel that I'm moving along. If you feel there's a change in your way of being, even though it's gradual, incremental, it's a very powerful and empowering feeling, because normally we think about the way we are as fixed, "it's just me, and it's never going to change ...". We think that our way of being is hard, and set, like dry cement, or concrete, or a bar code stuck inside. But that's not the case, that sense of identity can

change with practices like this one, with techniques that work like some kind of acid on our identity, on our sense of self. In terms of oscillating between the different identities, I can tell you, I've been doing this practice for a long time, it's been many years, it must be 40 by now, a long time, and it's very interesting.

I think I shared with you one of the experiences that I've been having more of lately. Initially, I started out thinking that I'm going to get rid of Joe, totally, and replace him, totally, with Buddha Joe. Now it's different. More and more often I get this feeling that, well, maybe I can't get rid of Joe, I mean not entirely. There is some sort of causal continuum at work, some connection to certain raw materials that I'm stuck with, maybe they're not all bad, maybe there are elements inside Joe that actually are Buddha Joe. Maybe Buddha Joe has been there all along, but I did not know him, I was not recognizing him or talking to him or living from him.

Think of that experience that I described earlier, of suddenly finding those moments, those singular moments of special clarity in your own life, by really going back to your childhood years. Instead of filing them away somewhere, in a folder of your mind, thinking, " ... those are interesting moments, but let's move on ..." use them to build your new self. And so you shift your whole sense of self, gradually, from your ordinary life story to those moments of clarity. And you keep on building that self with your moments of clarity, building bridges to that clarity.

Let me give you an example. My mentor is the Dalai Lama, and I try to find common things between the two of us. He was very attached to his mother; and so was I. I use my personal sense of being, and I open it to possible human similarities between my evolution and the evolution of other people like His Holiness. And that puts some fresh air into the process, so that it's not just Joe, it's Joe dialoguing with the clarity in other beings, if you will. That's how this practice works, because it opens us to sharing the process of clearing up the mind with others.

One frequent question is, is the Buddha an archetype or a historical figure? For most of early Buddhist history the Buddha actually forbade his followers to make images of himself. There is only a set of footprints; and some relics are kept in sacred shrines or stupas. But, at some point, people said, "It's been such a long time since the Buddha was around that we are forgetting what he looked like; we need to remember what he looked like." So they started sculpting him and painting him. Since then Buddhism has inspired many art traditions. Among them there are Buddhas that are supposed to be images of the historical Buddha. But, of course, we know very little about what the historical Buddha looked like, because no portrait of his was ever made.

Within the Mahayana tradition -- that is the compassion-based tradition, northern Buddhism if you will, not the Nalanda tradition -- there was this notion of infinite Buddhas, probably to encourage us by making us feel that we could be Buddhas too. There are hundreds of thousands of Buddhas recognized by this

cosmology; obviously, they are mostly generic. The tantric traditions talk about five meditational Buddhas: Amitabha, Amoghasiddhi, Vairochana.

Ratnasambhava and Akshobhya. Each one of them is identified with a specific color, a specific hand gesture, and so on. And so there are generic ways you can visualize a Buddha, to represent particular generic ideals. An example of a generic Buddha is the Medicine Buddha that Gelek Rimpoche for instance teaches about.

Another question is, what is the most important characteristic of the Buddha? One definition of the Buddha is *The Awakened One*, awakened from the nightmare of evolution, of confusion and delusion. In the oldest Buddhist tradition, what characterized him was that he had realized the experience of Nirvana -- an experience of total luminosity, bliss, clarity and openness, an experience that is said to be the best medicine for the human condition of suffering, of samsara. So he healed himself by realizing Nirvana. And, understanding that all human beings have this potential, he went out to teach.

In the Mahayana tradition that developed 500 years after the historical Buddha is said to have lived, two main qualities are described. One is his total freedom of mind, this total openness, his clarity of mind. Some people call it the Buddha mind, or the truth embodiment of the Buddha. Others describe it as being free from all defects. So it's a wisdom that grants full freedom from any limitation, from afflictions and defects. The other quality is compassion, which some describe as the cultivation of all qualities. Of these two qualities,

compassion is the most important. It is compassion that leads an enlightened person to help others and teach. If the Buddha wasn't compassionate, he would have just stayed in the forest and enjoyed his blissed-out medicine experience, he would not have bothered to teach, he would not have shared.

Actually, there are many different kinds of Buddhas. There are self-enlightened Buddhas, like the hermit Buddha, who realizes enlightenment in the wilderness and doesn't necessarily let anybody know about it. And then there are the fully enlightened Buddhas, Buddhas who don't just have the realization of freedom and enlightenment, but they also have compassion, and so they come out into the world and they try to help others reach enlightenment. That's what they call a supreme, fully enlightened, supremely perfectly fully enlightened Buddha.

In a sense, what we're trying to do in this practice is cultivate those two qualities, by combining the death-like experience of having the mind that could be free from all form with the life-like experience of identifying with an image that represents an emotional quality, one that is uplifting and beneficial -- like joy, compassion, love and equanimity. The unique thing about the Tantric tradition is that you practice developing the two qualities at the same time. You practice emptiness, or openness, and compassion all together, at once, in the same meditation. That is one of the reasons why this is a quicker, more effective way to become a Buddha.



We all have the Buddha quality of radical openness and clarity within us. And we also have the spirit of love and compassion within us. So we begin to identify with those qualities as our true self, our true nature. By identifying with those two qualities we move toward becoming what I call an enlightened altruist, or a Buddha-in-training.

Another question is, how do you shift your perception, what does it feel like when these shifts in perception, in experience, come over you? Do they come suddenly? Do they come gradually? In my experience, they have come very gradually. It takes years. I can't tell you how many years of practice I did, and how many times I would sit and do this meditation, and I would think, "What the heck am I doing? Why am I doing this meditation?..." Well, there is the fact that I made a commitment to do this practice to people that I deeply admire, and to a tradition that is deeply meaningful to me. It's hard to keep doing a practice that at times does not seem to show results.

Obviously it takes time, transformation is gradual, results are not immediate. Sometimes you feel like you're left in this limbo-like state, where you have these special experiences and meditations, and then you go out into the world, and you feel the same crazy afflictions and neuroses coming up, over and over again ... If you continue to practice, over the course of months and years, you will find that, over time, it actually *is* working, you find that you feel different, you feel lighter in your everyday life, you feel more and more like you do in your best meditations. Some kind of resonance seems to set in, a

resonance between your moments, even between your best moments and some of your worst moments, because they're just not so far away, they are not so different anymore ... And you start to see how you are redefining your self and your life, how you are reintegrating yourself around the best part inside of you ...

That's the best way I can explain this. You come to realize that you have more patience, more confidence, more capacity to avoid and let go of the slings and arrows coming your way from that crazy and confused world we all are part of. Now you're not going to get so tangled up in your limitations or neuroses. It's like you are going through an existential shift, and you feel lighter. It's like nothing you ever felt before. The closest thing I can relate it to is yoga. With yoga practice life feels lighter. Normally we carry a lot of stress in our bodies. We can carry a lot of physical tension, muscular tension, joint tension, and so on, but they keep us stiff. With some good yoga, enough of it to move the body, to get the energy flows moving the yoga way, you realize, "Oh, that was not reality, it was just a position I got stuck in. But now it feels much better, now it is so much easier to be in my body." And that change towards more easiness is more than just in your body. It is in your mind, in your identity, and in your personality.

## Chapter 15

### The Hero's Journey Through Everyday Life: Self-Creation in Practice

This is our last chapter, the last of this limb of study, so you will get a flavor of the journey we've taken. And, actually, it is part of a four-year program that sequentially introduces us to the *gradual path*, the path of contemplative insight and practices, starting from the simplest, most basic, most healing; moving on to learning how to live with others in acceptance, tolerance and compassion; and then into where we are now, at the end of the third year. This year we have been talking about using imagery and affirmation to create an internal flight simulator for a new life, a life that we want to build, one where we take the monastery with us, into our lives. And we try to prepare ourselves by re-envisioning ourselves and our whole life story.

This practice is like training, basic training to be an altruist in the city, and in the world, in this crazy world where people are so freaked out, so confused, so compulsive, so addictive.

We have been talking about how we can actually maintain a way of being that is based on peace, on love, on altruism. This gives us a road map, a way to re-parent ourselves, reinvent ourselves so that we are prepared mentally, through meditative training and incremental changes in our lifestyle. We are preparing to fly this ship in a different way; that is where we are.

In Part One we went through how we can change our self-image through role-modeling; that is what we rehearsed in the opening meditation. And we took that approach into changing our life story, our narrative. That is a very important part of our practice, because we are constantly playing the loop of who we are, and where we came from, and where we are going. And we want to work on that.

I was at a conference called "Advances in Meditation Research" earlier this year at the New York Academy of Sciences, and I gave a talk about the future of meditation research. One of the presenters, Judson Brewer, from Yale's psychiatry department, talked about a model of meditating for stopping our self-referential system. The self-referential system is supported in the brain's posterior cingulate (which is the part of the limbic system that is constantly asking, "how is this important for me, how does it matter to me, how do I fit into this?") and also in the medial prefrontal cortex (which is constantly running the loop, "this is my place in the world, this is where I come from, this is where I am going to ..."). It is kind of an executive, orienting loop. But I disagree with Jud. He seems to think that if people can shut down their posterior cingulate and quiet their medial prefrontal cortex, that would be enlightenment, that is the only thing they need to know. I think that, maybe, that would be only a first step.

As many Tibetan commentaries on meditation tell us, people who practice a method of finding union by immersing themselves in some state of bliss, of well-being, get very irritated when their afflictions return the moment

they come back to ordinary life and their ordinary selves, because all that bliss just goes right out the window. Why? Because of our sense of self, because of the way we orient ourselves, the way we conceive ourselves, the story we tell ourselves of who we are and what life is.

This is the software that runs our nervous system. If we tell our nervous system that we are small and helpless, alone and powerless, that the world is hostile and challenging and complicated, we end up living in a horror movie, and with our nervous system in a state of horror. I don't want to be running that movie in my mind. But that is the movie we run.

As a therapist I help people on the couch. We go through the horror movie, over and over again. We go over questions like, "Is that what really happened? Are you really that small? Are you really that powerless? Do you have a role? Can you do anything about it? And, slowly, something shifts. People start to sense a difference, there is something new in the loop. In this practice, we are doing this type of therapy without the therapist. This is a low-cost version, and it puts more responsibility on you. One of the challenges is that you better do the inner therapy. And you do that by projecting your virtual therapist up on the screen of your mind, connecting it perhaps with a real person, someone you can use as a reference point and bounce things off of. The rest of the time you really try to take it all in. You do the same thing that happens in psychotherapy, you work it through and through. People who have

this kind of practice, they practice over and over again, everyday, for years, maybe during their whole lives.

Some years ago I picked up the Dalai Lama's philosophy coach at JFK. I was supposed to take him to Woodstock, but I took him first to a barbecue at my mother's house. This was a special barbecue, because it was the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. Rinpoche stayed with us, and he would get up at 5 am, or whatever early hour, and chant, for several hours, before anyone saw the light of day. He would chant through all of these types of visions and practices as a way to keep in shape, for mental fitness.

You will find out, as you do this kind of practice over and over again, that the software becomes more and more real. In the retreat this coming weekend, we are going to start to use this program, not just to change our life story but to change the relationship with our nervous system; to try to see ourselves as capable beings and the world as friendly; to be in the chemistry of the flow, when we feel we have the burst of energy that we need to perform; to make a special effort and go the extra mile, open up and face whatever we need to face.

I disagree with Jud that just quieting the discursive mind and the mental loop of our life story, or identity, is enough. Most Buddhist traditions would agree. It is a good sign if you can shut them off for a while; because if you don't know that you can, if you don't know that it is possible to separate your mind from these perceptions temporarily, then you don't know that your mind can be

separated from them permanently. So it is a good thing to have those experiences, I don't mean to minimize them. Jud gets people on biofeedback machines so that they experience what it feels like when their posterior cingulate shuts down.

This is not my approach, but I guess it works for some people; different strokes for different folks. And, given this kind of training, once you are able to do that, then you might want to take this class! You might want to figure out, "Now that I have chilled out, and I am not telling myself this kind of horror story, how do I practice to tell myself a different story? And how do I get my mind in shape to be my own coach, my own guide? This is necessary because you are living in the world, you are not living in a monastery where your guru is right around the corner and you can always go in to see him, or her. It is more like Jeff Goldblum in the movie "The Big Chill." He needs help, and so he calls his guru and says "I forgot my mantra!" It's a great line.

Today we are going to talk about how you actually practice, and how you reintegrate and reprocess in light of how you go through one of what some people call "performance texts," or *sadhanas* in Sanskrit, that are used in this kind of practice. Some people refer to *sadhanas* themselves as practice. But, as Bob Thurman says, they are more than just practice, they are really about performance, about doing something. And in fact, the word *sadhana* means a way to accomplishing something.

How do you get unstuck from your sense of your self, your sense of your life story, how do you shut off the old movie? In part, by having breakthrough moments, when, suddenly, the movie, that movie that you perceive as your life, stops, and you can see it as a movie; that is important, and that is what practices like basic mindfulness give us. In a sense, experiencing those moments is like taking a vacation. What a vacation gives us is what those commercials for cruises to the Bahamas promise: you are going to the Bahamas as an accountant, or a stressed parent, or whatever you are, and you get there and become someone else, maybe a dancer, or a deep-sea diver, or something like that. But then you come back to your life and you are still the same old person. There is no change. And that is because you haven't changed the inner software, you have just had an external experience.

This kind of practice, this technology, goes deeper, it goes deep inside. And it speeds up the transformation process by guiding you to develop your own inner equipment for inner transformation, what I call a "prosthetic self." This allows you to attach yourself to a better version, an upgraded version of yourself and your life, version 2.0. This new version actually feels like a self, with a life, there is something happening, there is a person there, there is a world, perhaps other people around you, there is a space, there is a recognizable story, a life with a body and a mind. But it is not yours. Perhaps it is your mentor, or an idealized narrative, a construction from a tradition that you are entering into.



If you practice in this way, over and over again, you are actually connecting emotionally with the other, because the other means something to you. It must have some meaning for you, some chemical attraction. You are connecting with a live mentor who is your point of reference, who supports you and encourages you, a mentor that becomes more and more alive and closer to your life. And so you find that you actually have some place else to go, you are not stuck with the ordinary version of your self and your life.

That is a big part of the way this works. You might say it serves as a kind of *transitional object*, in the language of Western psychology. An example of a transitional object is a child's security blanket, or a teddy bear. It is an object imbued with mother's presence. It is safety and familiarity, so that when mother is not around the child can self-soothe, using the teddy bear. It is the same idea here. You develop a way to soothing yourself by envisioning yourself in this positive state of "I've solved all my problems, I've arrived, I'm the Buddha I knew I could be, I've solved the conflict ... we did it!" You get to have these moments in your imagination, over and over again, and they start to sink in, and to develop traction in your mind, until you become almost as comfortable attaching to them as you do attaching to your ordinary self and your familiar misery.

Why do we hold on to our familiar misery? Well, a big part of the reinforcement of the familiar misery is that it was misery that we felt with other people. We may think, "Oh, why do I hold on to that misery?" Well, it may be that

you had to hold on to those other people during your life, even when they made you miserable; or, it was miserable because they could not meet all your infinite demands; or whatever. In my experience as a therapist, it actually boils down to the relationships, that is what we are clinging to, and so we cling to the memories of childhood, however unpleasant they might be, because they are associated with some sense of a relationship of being attended, of being taken care of by someone else. And that is another part of the psychology of creating an alternate positive vision of reality that is connected to our teacher -- that is, to a real person, who is there for us, who cares for us, who knows us.

I highly recommend to you Richie Davidson's book *The Emotional Life of your Brain*. Richie has done some amazing work. He is the only neuroscientist who has really done the diligence of staying close to the tradition, being in constant dialogue and working with expert practitioners who know what meditation is for. His studies are interesting and useful because he has listened to people who know how to use meditation. Anyway, he talks about how mindfulness and other forms of meditation like compassion training -- and even devotion, the kind of devotional mentor yoga training that we are talking about now, which is the mainstay of Tibetan practice -- activates the left prefrontal cortex.

The prefrontal cortex, you recall, is specifically human, and it is that part of the cortex that watches over the rest of our brain, like a shepherd watches over the herd, and maybe also serves like the conductor of an orchestra, the one

who directs, " ... a little less stress please, a little bit more social interest ..." This does not happen unless we work on it. And so meditation builds the prefrontal cortex, as one of Richie's colleagues found, through a beautiful research study ... Anyway, the point I want to make here is that the left prefrontal cortex gives us distance over our intrusive, repressed, negative affect. This is partly why imagery is so powerful, it is a kind of therapeutic dissociation.

Have you heard about dissociation? It is a psychological defense that kicks in when the nervous system is overwhelmed, as when exposed to trauma, when we go into fantasy and we feel, "No, this isn't really happening, I am really over there, I am in the ceiling looking down, watching myself ..." or whatever. This is something that happens to all trauma victims. And all of us humans are trauma victims, in some way. Or, in other words, we are all trauma survivors -- let's put it that way, because this is not about self-pity, this is about providing a transparent, conscious, dissociation, about getting us to a point where we feel safe, and even empowered, and we say, "I'm not my freaked out, neurotic, helpless, powerless self, I'm this amazing capable being, I just need to learn how to install that way of being in my nervous system, and exercise, rehearse, what will become reality, now I am who I will be." That is why I call it a "prosthetic self."

And so we activate the left prefrontal cortex with mentally generated imagery. In that imagery we are more in the positive affect-oriented part of our repertoire, whereas in our childhood we were in deep emotional sensitivity, in the avoidance and distress affect repertoire. So, you see, shifting your dominant

response a little bit to your left cortex and a little bit forward to your prefrontal cortex gives you more space between you and the trauma.

This is why a lot of trauma therapies use imagery. Imagery helps to build a bridge, the so-called *affect bridge*, to being in a positive place. And then we can face the trauma, bringing confidence to it, and with that we upgrade it and transform it. We are not supposed to stay there, we are not creating this new place to stay in it. We don't become unstuck simply by splitting up and flying into this new heavenly realm, this life in the clouds. We become unstuck by constant shifting back and forth, between the positive platform and the old distress, or trauma, platform; we have a dialogue, a dialectic that allows us to do our own therapy of critiquing our old self, loosening up and seeing, "oh, what happened wasn't so bad, that was not the only way I could feel about it, I actually did survive, actually I'm really ok, I can still feel good, even with those terrible things happening to me; I can have those terrible feelings, and survive them, and grow from them."

That is part of what we talked about earlier, this cognitive dissonance, this going back and forth between the ordinary person that we are between meditation sessions and the extraordinary person, or heroic personality, that we practice during meditation sessions. It is a counterpoint and a creative dissonance or dialogue so that we can leverage our ordinary neuroses, and we can begin to break them up more quickly.

There is a whole range of possibilities that we can tap into if we exercise these positive states of mind and positive capacities. It is like practicing mindfulness, in that you gain a greater sense of presence and awareness, and so you can see the habit coming and not fall into it. Because here we are working with the mother of all habits, which is the self habit. If we want to change, and if we work on just changing habits, we are sort of whistling dixie, because we got a million habits, too many to tackle one by one. But at the heart of them all is the self habit, that rigid sense of self to where our self-preservation instincts gravitate. It is that self habit that is the governor, the filter that selects what memories we privilege: "This is me and this is what I am going to feel, this is what I'm going to remember, to expect ..." In a way it is like a cursor.

If your mind and body were a computer, the self, or I, would be the cursor that puts itself in a particular place at a particular time in a particular program, and then it just runs. And if you have no freedom of self, you have no freedom within to shift, or transform.

This is a very powerful practice, because it goes right into the mother habit, the self habit, what this tradition refers to as the perception and conception of ordinariness: "That this is who I ordinarily am, this is my ordinary self, this is the way I always experience myself and think of myself." Once we pick our sense of self, we pick our perception of the world, we see the world with our glasses, from our point of view, from our perception, our corner. We are not

going to be able to change unless we change our perception of ourselves. This is a powerful practice to do that, because it brings together the meditative state of consciousness, the imagination, with analytic thinking, to try to pinpoint the habitual patterns of identity that are like the central processing unit of our suffering, or like the magnets around which our suffering gravitates.

This is a very powerful practice, and I believe it's faster. The promise is that it only takes one to sixteen lifetimes to reach enlightenment, compared to three aeons, if you go the sutra way.

One question is, how do we deal with the judge, how do I deal with that internal judge that is critical of my meditative experience, my practice, or my wishes to feel positive, the judge who goes to worst-case-scenario thinking, that kind of judge?

Judgment in Buddhist psychology is a so-called *variable mental factor*, which means it is good if it is well intended, and it is bad if it is not. The way you deal with judgment is the way you deal with everything else: you throw it in the hopper and bring awareness to it, to who is making that judgment, and what identity, or character, or script, it is trying to bring you into conformity with. We treat the internal judge as a voice in the script, the movie script, and we find out if it is the old script talking, if it is trying to say no to the new script, if it is trying to resist change.

I would add here that there is also a chemical- neurobiological aspect to this, and there are also poetic ways of thinking about this. John Keats, the great

Romantic poet, wrote about *negative capability*, meaning the willing suspension of disbelief. This great idea lies at the root of the psychoanalytic method. Freud got the idea from one of the German Romantic philosophers who talked about letting the mind flow without judgment. The idea is that if we want our minds to do creative work, we need to rein in the critic, we need to have a way to override the critic.

There are a couple of ways that we do that. If you recall, in the opening meditation we used our imagination to dissolve the whole universe into emptiness. There is a neurobiological correlate to this, there are times in our perceptual process when suddenly the brain is momentarily purged of content, and it shows up as a certain spike of EEG activity. We don't usually notice when it happens -- for example, when we go sit somewhere and read a novel, or we work, or we watch a work of art, or we meditate, or we meet a friend, each time our minds open in a new direction, they reorient themselves to this new event, this new information. But we don't notice the empty moment, when the switch happens.

That is also what we go for in these practices. Again, one way to do it is to use our imagination and wipe the slate clean for a moment; and we wipe the critic away with that. There is another way, which involves a more powerful, deeper, more structured method. You remember, when we do the meditation we don't just engage with the mentor; in these practices we also become the mentor, or the mentor dissolves into us. That happens when the image of the

mentor becomes much smaller, it comes into us and melts in us, and we melt together, we melt into some union, we fuse, along with all the love and affection we might feel for our mentor. And we use that to undo our inner critic, which comes from another part of our nervous system, from the superego, from the fear of the parents rather than the love of the parents.

At this point we often make use of the practice of the Wisdom Mother or Prajñāpāramitā. You can find a guided meditation on becoming the Wisdom Mother on the Nalanda website. The Wisdom Mother practice is the feminine version of Sheer Brilliance; and they are both versions of the intuitive wisdom practices, or healing wisdom practices, of the Tibetan Tradition. Both are really important. In a way, Prajna, the Wisdom Mother, the Goddess, is more important historically.

I was joking with Mary Reilly-Nichols, who leads many retreats with me, as we were comparing the Buddhist and Hindu yoga traditions, and how they treat the male and female roles differently. The Hindu yoga traditions are like the Republicans, in the sense that the male is at the top position, wisdom, and the female is the transformative energy. The Buddhist tradition, on the other hand, is more like the Democrats, in that they are more accepting of the feminine, and they see the Wisdom Mother at the top, as the Ultimate, while the male is well meaning but misguided; he has compassionate energy but needs the wisdom of the mother to get him on track. Of course, we each have both male and female within us, and we need to work both sides. We will be spending time with



the Wisdom Mother this weekend and probably again this Fall, when we talk about the *Inner fire* practice.

Tantra practice is about rapid transformation, about working with our unconscious mind. It is about identifying those states of consciousness which allow us to grow most quickly -- the ones that heal, that disarm our violent, destructive emotions, and so on -- what today we call *transformative affect states*, and in the old days we called euphoria or ecstasy. Within those states there is a subject and an object, and in the Buddhist and Hindu traditions each is assigned a gender and a symbol. In the Buddhist tradition the subject is represented by the moon, the gender is male, and the quality of the male, subjectivity, that is the real deity.

When I say "male" I am not talking about the packaging, that is to say what looks like a man or looks like a woman. I am talking about the experiential realization, the energy-mind process that is considered to be the real deity. And that has a subjectivity and an objectivity, like everything else. In this case there is the subjective quality of motivation, and an objective cognitive awareness. So, in the Buddhist view the male is the subject, its symbol is the moon, and it is described as the energy, or flow, what I call *blissful openness*; a more technical translation is "inseparable bliss void." Prajñāpāramitā is the female; she has four arms; she is a multitasker. In the upper arms she holds a text, just like Shear Brilliance, her male counterpart. But instead of a sword she holds a vajra, which indicates that she has male power, she is not one-sided, she has the full mastery

of the nervous system, the neural network of bliss. And that is the mastery of the nervous system which gives us the capacity to tap into the flow of bliss.

The objectivity which Prajñāpāramitā represents is enlightenment, and in order to be enlightened there is no possible negotiation about what is needed here, no shortcut, no team work; you have to have all the pieces together in your own mind-body processes, you are responsible, whether you consider yourself male, female, neuter, transgender, or whatever.

In the Buddhist context, the Mother Wisdom is technically defined as *clear light*; some people call it *clear light of bliss*, some people call it *clear light of death*, of *clear light translucency*. Whereas Shear Brilliance, or Manjushri, is more like a euphoric state, a state that makes you feel like, "I am so blissful, I am so enthusiastic and ecstatic about going out to illuminate the world, to help myself and others ..." Mother Wisdom is already there. She is just light. She can see, like an omniscient narrator, with the clarity that sees that she doesn't have a self or a position in the universe. She doesn't have a subjective position.

You can see why the Mother is so important, because in the fundamental dyad of mammalian existence the one who is objective is the mother. How is the mother objective? She is the one that thinks with both nervous systems, both minds, male and female. She is living in a place of connectivity rather than a place of disconnection, individuation, or separateness. She has the omniscient awareness that values all life, in whatever form, whether it is mine or yours or somebody else's. Omniscient means that it is everywhere: it wants everyone to

be well and happy. It is that kind of clarity, that kind of ecstatic clarity, or *ecstatic altruism* as I like to call it, that is the objectivity of the Mother Wisdom.

What is so great about Tantra, from a technical Buddhist point of view? Tantra is a form of Mahayana practice that allows us to transform more quickly. The Goddess, Prajñāpāramitā, is identified with the text of The Transcendent Wisdom, which has a sutra form and a tantra form. The Heart sutra is part of the Transcendent Wisdom. It is a very popular sutra about wisdom, the wisdom of emptiness, and how emptiness is essential to compassion. Nāgārjuna said, famously, that emptiness is the womb of compassion. That means that to be compassionate you must have a radically open mind. Radical openness is key. You can't be compassionate if you are biased. You can't be compassionate if you think of yourself as separate, as not related.

All Mahayana Buddhists love to chant the Heart sutra; so do Zen followers. It is even chanted in a movie directed by Bernardo Bertolucci, the famous Italian movie director, called "Little Buddha." It is the teaching of emptiness: we are not what we think we are, we are not so separate, we are all part of the whole. The Heart sutra ends with the Mahavidya mantra, the formula of the greatest science, which is a pretty far-out science, and it goes:

*"Om gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate bodhi svaha!"*

*Gate* means "gone," the past participle of to go. I translate it as *transcendent*, because what it means is that you are gone from where you are now to the next place. It is repeated five times, one for each of the five stages in the

practice of becoming an enlightened being: the accumulation stage, the application stage, the meditation stage, the wisdom stage, and, lastly, the mastering stage. Each *gone*, each step transcended clears one set of limits out of the way, and on to the next step. And instead of *Om* and *Svaha*, which is very Sanskrit, I like to say *Oh hail*, which is a more Roman way of saying it. So my full translation is:

"All hail transcendent, transcendent, completely transcendent,  
supremely transcendent Enlightenment!"

It is a beautiful mantra, isn't it? And I do know a song for it. If you come to the retreat you will learn it. Of maybe we will all learn it together some other time. You might say that this mantra represents the triumph of our enlightenment and that of all living beings. We will go more into that on the weekend. I don't know whether we will be able to record the weekend's teachings, I haven't made arrangements for that. But everything will come around again. Everything always comes around.

Now let us talk about the practice. I don't want to go too much into the ritualistic details. But we have to, because these practices are about form and structure, they give a form and structure to our meditation, and so the more we understand them, the more effective our meditation practice, and the better off we are.

For a beginning audience, this practice of process transformation is a long haul, I have to say. The texts, or sadhanas, or scripts, are packed with meaning. I have a hard time writing short sadhanas, because I want to put everything in; that is my delusion. We are going to use the Manjushri sadhana. It is posted in the Nalanda web site, on the class page. This practice starts as most of these do, with a bunch of things that are part of the sevenfold offering. It begins with *refuge, praise*, what I like to call it admiration, or admiring, admiring the ideal. Then come the *offerings*, then *confession*, or *disclosing* ... And so on, we went through these earlier.

In the case of Manjushri's practice, praise, the first stage, is broken down into a range of preliminary, or preparatory, steps. The text reads:

*"In an open-minded state, free and clear, all other earthlings and I take refuge in your shining example; to heal and free all sentient beings, I will conceive the spirit of enlightenment and embody intuitive wisdom in this life as quickly as possible, until we are all Prajnas and Manjushris."*

So here you have it, male and female forms of sheer brilliance are together. You will notice a couple of things. One is we take refuge. Refuge is part of all Buddhist practices, it helps us get orientation, direction. It's like facebook, in the sense that you are going somewhere you like for help.

Now, to make a refuge strong, and not just a fad, you have to really understand what you are going for, and how the refuge is going to help you: What is wrong with me, what does Buddha have to offer, and how is it going to help me? If you are an informed consumer and you understand what you are really going to get from the Buddha, as a leader and a role model, as a historical figure, from his tradition, and from the community that practices the tradition, then you are taking a realistic refuge, an effective refuge. In this case, the refuge can come in three different flavors.

We have touched on these in years 1, 2 and 3 of this program. At the start refuge can be just for myself, because "I cannot think of anyone else right now." This is the *individual vehicle*, the one we go to when we feel, "I just need peace now, I am so freaked out ..." We all feel that way at times, throughout the day, right? Then we have the *universal vehicle*, the Mahayana version of refuge: "Now I think I can take care of myself, and I am getting ready to change my world, because I don't want to leave it, and for that I need to master not only my own self, my own mind, but also wisdom and compassion, so that I can understand others and interact skillfully with them." Here you take refuge in your ideal, in the Buddha's example, to realizing your personal freedom.

So, I can take refuge at the level of "I just want to stop the cycle of stress and violence, that is what I want to do, that is all I need to do." Or I can take it because "I don't want to just stop my cycle of stress and violence, I also want to learn how to help others to stop it. And for that I want to be more like you,

Buddha, you reached Nirvana and you also have the compassion to teach others. I want both the mind of Nirvana and the compassion. I want the body that is the great broadcaster, the megaphone, or whatever instrument that promotes compassion, and happiness."

So, in the Mahayana tradition, I say that "I will conceive the spirit of enlightenment and embody intuitive wisdom to heal all sentient beings." To conceive "the spirit of enlightenment" is another way of saying to conceive a special kind of love and compassion, special in that they are universal. I like to call it "the spirit of altruism," or "enlightened altruism," which is a kind of altruism that aims at starting a chain reaction: "I want not just to help people get whatever they need; I want to help people become altruists so that they can help others to become altruists, and they will help others. And then we will have enough altruists on the planet to really take care of all the problems."

That is the essence of the spirit of enlightenment: a chain reaction of altruists. We buy into this solution recognizing that none of us is omnipotent, none of us can have everything or change everything, we need teamwork for this. And to create teamwork, first we need to create a team. So anybody who wants to be on the altruist team please stand up!

The third type of refuge is the Vajrayāna refuge, the refuge of the tantric practice, which adds to the chain reaction speed for transformation. It says "quickly, quickly, we need this in a rush." In Vajrayāna the refuge formula is "I will

embody intuitive wisdom in this life as quickly as possible, until we are all Prajnas and Manjushris."

So, if you are taking up this practice, you are going into it not just for your own freedom, your own liberation, but for the liberation of all. You are committing to develop a kind of capacity to help other people, and to start a chain reaction of expanding altruism. In the Tantric method "I am going to do it now, I don't want to wait, I want to be a good person forever, and have good children who have good friends. I want to do that now!"

After taking refuge we do the Four Boundless Moods, to exercise our compassion muscles:

*"May all beings have real happiness and its causes!*

*May we all be freed from all suffering and its causes!*

*May we all enjoy and savor excellent things!*

*May we all know unwavering equanimity!"*

These are like voice exercises: they help us get our key, so-to-speak, we are putting our mind in the right tone, and that means the tone to develop positive motivation.

Then come the *offerings*. Here we do something that is not very usual when beginning these practices: we bless the offerings. That blessing brings awareness to how beautiful things can be, how wonderful life can be; it brings



some kind of positive light to what perception, experience and awareness can bring to us. It's like when God said "Let there be light, ... and then it was good." It honors the goodness of things. Here we are recognizing that all things have the taste of bliss-void. Actually, everything that gives us pleasure gives us a little bit of bliss. In this practice this is really important, because we need to get ourselves into a mood of bliss.

In the Mahayana practice we are mostly thinking about how to build merit, or positive energy, by doing good deeds and thinking good thoughts. That is what real altruists, really good people like mother Theresa, do. We are not such good people, not really; we're people in a hurry. And so we get our pleasure by focusing on very pleasant and beautiful things, we use the natural and organic that our bodies and minds are capable of experiencing with beautiful things. In this way this is an aesthetic kind of practice. And in this context blessing the inner offerings is a way of building merit, or positive energy, and then sharing it with your mentor. It's just like when you invite your friends over: you want them to have a really great time with you, you want to talk to them about everything, so you clean your house, you get some great chocolates or you bake something terrific, you may even make espresso! As you are doing all this you are creating bliss.

Essentially, if our minds are in the right place, and our thinking is in the right way, we will be this kind of an altruistic being, we will embody these qualities. And so we visualize Manjushri, and we develop a sense of admiration and awe.

If you are interested in doing these practices and you want to get the full benefit out of them, you have to come up with a beautifully attractive, even inspiring, elegant or sensuous physical image. This is kind of iconophilia, you might say.

You want to imagine really beautiful images of the ideals and also of the mentors that you want to use. Images are very powerful. That is why you could get killed in Tibet for having pictures of the Dalai Lama; that is also why people in Tibet smuggle them. It is not just out of some sense of sentimental value. They use such pictures in their meditation. And he does have a sweet smile, right? You may also want to lay out offerings to get you in the mood. Of course, do not do it if it is a big hassle.

This is not like church, it is not a ritual thing; this is aesthetics. So you choose according to your own aesthetic sensitivity. If you are a Zen type, you are sparse and clean; or if you want the Tibetan way, then bring everything out -- the incense, the candles, and so on. Anyway, you know what you like, so you give it to yourself, to be inspired by its beauty. That beauty is going to be part of the chemistry that gets you into this practice.

We may need more practical advice on offerings, to overcome our critical mind, and to open our mind to the new. And then there is the generosity aspect: you actually offer as a welcome, as if you are welcoming a friend into your life. It is like when you want to make a real bond with a person, and you bring a gift. The more gifts you bring the better. In Tibet they have offering contests, about how big the offering can get. Some people make offerings that

are bigger than buildings! You might say this is a certain kind of capitalism, this accumulation of gifts. But in this tradition they feel that by amassing beautiful things one is building on generosity, a sense of abundance of the precious things of life, the preciousness of the opportunity to have a positive relationship with an inspiring teacher, or a positive hope in life, a direction. We feed all that with offerings because it is a good thing we are feeding. "And so, to you, my inmost friend and guide, I offer bliss waves and distinctive gifts, goddesses dancing with six divine senses (or gods if it is a female deity), I offer my sublime, my embodied systems and elements, my subtle mind-body systems and elements, my secret muse, my soul mate in ecstasy ... " In short, you are offering everything. You could just offer an apple, but if you want to get a full bank into your pockets then throw everything in the offering, include it all, even your last mystical experience, just throw it all in there. The more the better, don't be afraid, it's good for you.

After *offerings* comes *confession*. Confession helps to overcome that sense of scarcity psychology, which is what generosity practice is designed to do. It is this overwhelming sense, this scarcity psychology, which is closely related to the scavenger and predatory nervous system: if I think things are very precious, that there is not enough to go around, then I can't give you any. It is not in our nervous system to give, and it is certainly not the nervous system that creates wealth or abundance or civilization. Those are created by people

invested in sharing and innovating, and creating abundance, abundance is the vehicle, that is what we celebrate.

Instead of *confession*, I prefer to use the word "disclosure" here. What you do is you go through your life, scan it, rigorously. Scan everything you did wrong, or regret, just as rigorously. Scan every part of your being, even though you may have no control over all of it. You scan your killer instinct, your self-cherishing, your inner critic, whatever it is, you scan it and you say, "oh yes, I see, I regret all that ..." And so you throw it all in the hopper and ask, "What am I supposed to do about this, Buddha?" If you are meditating in the presence of Manjushri, he gives you the courage to say, "Maybe I can do something about this, maybe I can correct all this nonsense." Some practitioners even go back to past lives to correct mistakes. In our cosmology, in our culture, you may want to think instead about your DNA, with all the killing and self-protection and scarcity in it, to do that: "I need to correct my DNA, I need to correct some epigenetics, I need to start reading my genome differently." Epigenetics, as you know, studies how your cells read your DNA; and you can change that by changing your inner chemistry.

There has been some fascinating research since the late 1990s, after the discovery of *neuroplasticity*, the fact that nerves keep growing and changing constantly throughout our whole lives. They change as cells fire at different rates and make different connections, and different chemical messengers float through the cells into the nucleus and attach to the genome in certain ways,

affecting what we call *releaser genes* and *promoter genes*, that is genes that either stop or enhance the production of certain proteins. Essentially, it's like they are watching the DNA as if they were supervisors of assembly lines, and at times they upgrade or downgrade certain kind of chemicals. This is epigenetics, it is at the very cutting edge of research and it is somewhat controversial. People like Richie Davidson and other heavy-duty neuroscientists believe that one of the ways that meditation works is by changing the way we read our DNA. What this means is that meditation affects the chemical environment of the cells, and that affects the messages that are given to the genome about what it needs to produce or not to produce.

There is also research that shows that the biochemical condition of both mothers and fathers -- not just mothers -- meaning their stress levels prior to conceiving a child, have an impact on the way their child's DNA is run, and the way the child develops. This is very sobering stuff. That is the sort of the Lamarckian side to this. Lamarck was a French naturalist that believed in the inheritance of acquired characteristics, the idea that we become what we do, as opposed to Darwin's natural selection, which says that evolution is in the genes. Lamarck's theory is gaining ground these days. Maybe both Lamarck and Darwin were right, that both genes and what we do affect evolution.

After *confession* we go to *congratulations*. This means you all are buddhas, you all have Buddha qualities, even when you may not know it or you may not believe it. Essentially, we are moving out of the idealization mode and

into a more participatory mode, a more participatory relationship with our ideal, with more identification. Instead of feeling smaller, less than, or competitive, we are learning and training to develop a more engaged, active life. It is like someone in sports who is a member of a team and has been sitting on the bench at the game for a long time, trying to get ready to get in the game, trying to get the courage to identify with that confidence that says, "I could be in the game." With the mentor it is "I see how you do it, it is not that far from me" and not that remote "Oh dear, I am floored!" It's "I understand now how you are doing that!"

This is admiration, but a different kind of admiration, admiration that has gratitude in it, and a sense of empowerment in it: "I want to be like you, I want to be like that." That is the meaning of congratulations here. It is said that congratulating in such a way, feeling grateful about other people's qualities, is the quickest way to generate merit. Some people do good deeds to get merit; here you get benefit just by saying it, "Oh, look what great thing you did!" Of course this is the complete opposite of our TV, say CNN news, where we go through this busy review, every morning, noon and night, of all the terrible things that people did to other people, all the horrible things that are happening, all around the world.

Here we are generating merit. We say "From the depths of my heart I rejoice in whatever forms of happiness dawn like dreams for all beings, confused and enlightened." Some people may be cynical and say about other people's

good fortune, "Oh well, it's not really such a big deal, it's just a promotion" or "they just got a car, but that's not going to bring them real happiness." That's not the way to go. Be happy for them and wish them well: "I hope they really enjoy it!" Meditate on others' good fortune. The good things that happen may be transient, they come and go; but if we keep focusing on the good things that are happening to others and the good qualities that people have, we are promoting a sense of positivity and expansiveness in us, and that's generating a positive affect.

Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk I have mentioned before who lives up in Vermont, is an example of how to practice this. His focus is gratitude, and how gratitude brings happiness. He cofounded "A Network for Grateful Living." You can check it out at [gratitude.org](http://gratitude.org). He has a wonderful video called "A Beautiful Day," about the universe, and about what a wonderful gift it is to be alive. It's really inspiring. He also has a TED talk.

As we identify more with our ideal, we feel "Now, let me get in the game, help me, how do I do this? In other words, we request the teaching, we ask for the help we need. This is the next stage, *requesting teachings*:

*"From your heavenly pure science and art,  
please shower profound and magnificent teachings  
to develop and nurture these lotus groves  
of sensitive beings spreading pure intuition."*

"*Profound and magnificent teachings*" refers to the wisdom teachings of openness, of emptiness which are profound; and the teachings of love and compassion, unconditional love and compassion, which are magnificent. And we need both teachings. In the tantras we practice them together: we meditate on the truth body with the space-like mind, which is the form of emptiness, of wisdom; and at the same time we also meditate on the illusion-like deity body, which is the form of compassion it embodies, and it serves as a template for a compassionate way of being.

As a formal response to our request for teachings, the teacher gives us *consecration, or blessing*. This is a fourfold consecration that gives permission to understand all the different levels of our mind and body and follow the path of the unexcelled yoga tantras to the end, to full enlightenment, in this long lifeline. We don't need to go into the details of that now; we will eventually. But basically each of the four blessings -- the blessings of the crown chakra, the throat chakra, the heart chakra and the blessing of all three together -- prepare us to practice a certain part of the tantric path, starting from the creation stage to the beginning of the perfection stage, through the middle and to the end of the perfection stage. We will be talking about that more in the next year.

Mantra is another form of practice. We have not done a whole lot with mantra. We will. Mantra practice is wonderful. I included a bit of it in the opening meditation, when we did Manjushri, Sheer Brilliance. There's *Dhi*, the



seed syllable of his mantra, that appears when his duplicate comes into our crown, it mingles with our heart, and then it becomes a golden hue. Dhi is the Sanskrit abbreviation of *bodhi*, which means enlightenment, brilliance, or intelligence.

Another part of the teaching that we request is to learn to create ourselves. This is where we melt into the openness. Here we do the death process. We are dying, our neurotic self is dying, and we are reborn, born as our heroic self, checking in with our clear-light mind, the primordial awareness. The inner positive thinking bubbles up as a dhi syllable, and, suddenly, we become the body of Manjushri, the whole body. We visualize a wheel at our heart, where the sun disk would be. Some teachings talk about a wheel with blades, as tools to help us transform. At the hub of the wheel is the dhi, and then the mantra, "Om A-Ra Pa-Ca-Na Dhi!"

What does the mantra mean? We know Om. *Ara* means quickly, *Pacana* means to cook or to develop, and *dhi* means brilliance, or genius. So, altogether, Manjushri's mantra means "May we quickly develop genius," or "May I quickly develop genius," or just "quickly develop genius" or "May genius quickly develop."

Anyway it is the same, and you can say it in English or Sanskrit. As you say it you see the energy flowing around the wheel. Sometimes when you say the mantra the syllables light up, like a wave of light. Then, suddenly, the wave becomes something with a pulse, and it bursts out of you, as it melts away your

doubts and fears. It expands outwards, to benefit all living beings, to bring clarity in them. As it shares the clarity with the enlightened beings, it becomes more intense. The mantra, "Om ara pacana dhi" is promoting positive thinking. And so you get into some kind of spell-like state.

With practice, if you say the mantra enough, it will start to announce itself in your mind. You will find that it is very easy to do. This is a short mantra, and you can quickly get your mind into that groove. The traditional analogy here is that of a potter at the wheel: at the start he spins it, and then it turns on its own. Think of prayer wheels, like the ones downstairs, here at Tibet House. They have the traditional mantra, Om mani padme hum, in them. As you spin them, they generate free mechanical karma for you. Here, saying Manjushri's mantra, saying it enough, brings that positivity in your heart, and it fills you with light that beams out to other beings.

One question is, how do you connect the practice of the recitation of the mantra with the visualizations? This can get complicated, but it does not have to. My advice is, don't make it complicated. The mantra is here, in my heart, like a rosary, or a song, written in my heart. As I say the mantra, it touches upon my heart, and it warms it up and lights it up. You imagine that, you visualize that as you say the mantra, 7, 21 or 108 times, according to the tradition.

You want to get into a trance, and you can do that with this practice. I don't mean a trance in a negative sense, like you lose it. Here the point is to get into a groove, a positive flow. The benefit of saying the mantra out loud -- and

you can use your hands to go along with it -- is that you engage your mind and body more deeply in the process, your nervous system is more committed to it, and committed at multiple levels. Then you do it, you live it. And that is how we learn: not by theory but by living it. Catholics have something similar, they visualize at their hearts the prayer, "Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior, have mercy on me." They say it millions of times. And this can have an amazing effect.

Next we *request presence*. We need the presence of the teacher, the role model, the ideal, in order not to get freaked out by the cognitive dissonance of going back and forth between who we are in our ordinary life and our practice. As a therapist, you experience this stage when people feel better in sessions, but when they go out into the world, the world still feels as threatening and scary as usual. It freaks them out, they don't know how to deal with it, so they come back. And the therapist has to patch them together again.

Eventually, people start to take the therapist with them, they get a sense that the therapist is with them, which makes the difficulty a little less difficult. And so the process continues, gradually.

In this practice, this process, this relationship, this vision, this culture is always with me, protecting me, moving me in that direction, the one I have chosen ... The more we have this sense of constancy, the more we can commit to the practice. We go on, oscillating between our ideal mind and our critical mind. We are not oscillating from "good parents, they love me" to "bad parents, they have abandoned me." It is not about "Where is my mentor now, has he

abandoned me?" Now we know better, we can call them on the phone. And if we do this practice right, soon enough we get a sense that it's always there, available, and it will be there with us until the end, when each one of us becomes a master altruist, or an altruist genius, or however you want to see your ideal. You find your own genius and you use it to benefit the world. You use it in a particular way, as part of a chain reaction, so that it spreads even further. And when each one of us has created a little microclimate of altruism and enlightenment, that's when we are done, when our job is done, when the process is over. We have become what we admire.

In this practice you can't actually reach the goal without benefiting the people around you. So you learn to appreciate people who need your help, or who could benefit from your help. Helping others is an essential part of what you need to do to support and achieve your own development, your altruism.

After *presence* comes *correcting*. Think of this as "Errors and Omissions." It is not really that important.

Finally, the last step is *dedication*. You take all the goodness that you have developed, you seal it in and you mark it for a purpose, you put it in a certain account. You can say,

*"With this insight (or energy) I am going to become Sheer Brilliance*

*And help others become Sheer Brilliance*

*To transform the world and benefit all"*

You are marking all the mental effort you put out into your practice, and all the neural and biological advance within you, for the particular purpose of helping others. You do that so that when you get freaked out, or angry, you don't lose the benefit. You have sealed the benefit, you have put it in the bank. You seal in the goodness that has been generated, with some deep breathing, the breathing we've been doing -- holding the breath for a moment, then bringing the energy from below and the breath from above to the heart, where the mantra is. And you protect it. You protect whatever good you get, from the mind that comes up if we get frightened or thrown off-balance, the mind that likes to say, "oh, that wasn't a good meditation, that was all a bunch of garbage anyway."

It is important to commit the goodness you have generated before you get up from the practice to this ongoing communal enterprise. It is not just "me" becoming a better and happier person, in isolation from the world. It's all of us! This is about practicing together and being part of this human wave of altruistic people, and not just in this tradition but in many other traditions of altruistic people who are trying to make the world a loving place. We want to seal our solidarity with that big wave of consciousness. If it weren't for that, we would be in much worse shape.