

TWO

THE FIRST LEVEL OF THE PATH

The Transcendent Attitude, Compassion for Yourself, and Taking a Break

Now we have learned a little about “Buddhism” and the Tibetan past, and we have learned a bit about how to visualize the wish-fulfilling gem tree field. We’ll soon return to that field, and even elaborate it a bit further, but first, we will think through the root verses for this next stage.

My liberty and opportunity found just this once,

Understanding how hard they are to get and how quickly lost,

Bless me not to waste it in the pointless business of this life,

But take its essence and make it count!

Fearing the fires of suffering in hellish states,

I heartily take refuge in the Three Jewels;

Bless me to intensify my joyous efforts

To give up sins and achieve a mass of virtue!

Tossed by fierce waves of evolution and addiction,

Crushed by the sea monsters of the three sufferings,

Bless me to intensify my will to liberation

From this terrifying, boundless ocean of existence!

As for this egoistic life cycle, intolerable prison,

I give up my delusion that it's a garden of delight,

Bless me to educate myself in ethics, meditation, and wisdom,

The treasuries of the jewels of noble beings,

And raise aloft the victory banner of true liberation!

The name of this stage, transcendence (Tibetan, *ngeś-'byung*), is often rendered as “renunciation,” which is not incorrect but in English connotes self-denial, asceticism, the hardship of giving things up, even self-negation. I used to think it was about that. When I became a monk in my twenties, I even felt righteous about “renouncing” pleasures, mortifying myself, being hard on myself, thinking I was really getting somewhere. It actually took me about thirty years to realize that this step of moving into an initial level of freedom, breaking out of all kinds of habitual bondages and addictive preoccupations, is the beginning of the experience of *real pleasure*, pleasure that comes from within.

In the usual approach to happiness, we concede to an inability to feel any inner well-being. We constantly seek little breaks of relief from the stress of our pursuit of lasting satisfaction and our relentless failure to achieve it. The transcendent attitude that we want to develop, however, offers us a procedure to change our habits, to break free from our futile preoccupations. We can achieve a feeling of inner freedom that opens us to the more fruitful pursuit of our opportunities and a realistic enjoyment of them. *This transcendent attitude in fact is the achievement of real compassion for ourselves.* Having compassion for ourselves means opening up to really feeling our own pain and becoming determined to overcome it. We do this by analyzing its sources and understanding how to prevent them, and then by moving creatively to do so.

We develop the transcendent attitude by following specific steps of thought. First, we reevaluate our self-image by looking critically at our sense of our reality. “What am I?” we must ask. When we do ask this and reflect deeply on it, we realize we have been taught that we are not really very important, not very meaningful. The theories of physics, biology, and psychology that we are taught in school tell us we are material entities randomly present for no reason, that we came out of material complexity into consciousness and will subside back into matter and spiritual nothingness at death. We must change this incorrect sense of self.

We come to a happier, healthier, more realistic sense of self by understanding our spiritual purpose, by recognizing how rare and precious each of us is and what a great opportunity our human life is for us. We *can* attain freedom, we *can* understand our true nature and that of the world. We must come to a realistic self-esteem, a new kind of appreciation of ourselves.

Second, we must realize how impermanent we are, confront our inevitable death, imagine that at some unknown point we will cease to exist in this embodied form, “*how quickly lost.*” We do this mentally and regularly to intensify our energy to take advantage of every moment for positive development.

Third, we concentrate on our evolutionary causality, which means that we commit to understanding the causes and conditions of things and events. We accept that nothing is random, nothing is purposeless, everything has evolutionary momentum and impact. This acceptance intensifies our mindfulness about everything around us and everything we do, say, and think. Nothing is insignificant. Everything has an effect, for good or ill. So we’d better make it good.

Fourth, we confront our habitual egoistic mental process. This means that we make the effort to notice how we are bound in a circle of self-preoccupation that dooms us to anxiety, dissatisfaction, and frustration. We recognize that we are never content with what we are or have, that we always want more or something else. Instead of finding the treasures in our moments, we are lost in memories or fantasies, comparing the seemingly inadequate present to romanticized past events, or unrealistically anticipated futures. This fourth thought step frees us from an amazing pile of self-

imposed ideas, ambitions, judgments, expectations. With these four thought steps, we slowly but surely move from the anxious, fearful, discontented, mundane outlook up into the realm of the transcendent attitude. We feel compassion for ourselves, and we decide to allow ourselves to find our true purpose in life, our true fulfillment.

When you achieve the full transcendent attitude, you are like a man whose hair and clothes have caught fire—you can think of nothing but how to get into some water to put out the flames. Ordinary pleasures and pursuits seem absolutely trivial, and you want none of them. You want to learn, reflect, meditate, realize, and transform yourself from a helpless, driven being to a free person. You feel on the one hand a great relief, and on the other an intense focus on the infinity of the now. You want to enter the refuge of the Buddha, the protected reality (Dharma) he teaches us about, and the Community that helps us live it. Then you want to *be* that refuge.

When I had my first hints of transcendence, I was gripped by this exquisite ambiguity of peaceful release and intense determination. I felt free of all habitual ambitions, and I was determined to become a monk. My wise teacher told me it was good I was living with such a determined focus, but that I should not formalize my monkhood because I would change my mind about that later. I did not believe that to be possible, so I went ahead to formal ordination anyway. It is wonderful that a Buddhist, enlightenment-oriented society accepts and honors the renunciate and supports her or him to stay alive while pursuing the ultimate. But our productivity-obsessed society is not that developed, not truly supportive of the individual's will to freedom. So, in time, my wise teacher was proved right. Eventually, I couldn't live as a transcendent anymore, and I had to return to society. When I did, I attempted to focus on the transcendent attitude and still support myself and others. This attempt has ups and downs, of course, but the joy and relief of transcendence energize the love that makes it all possible and worthwhile.

THE JEWEL TREE MEDITATION: SECOND ROUND

Now, move into your meditative space before the jewel tree.

Dissolve yourself into the sacred space. Let your ordinary personality and

your mental worries and your thoughts and your self-image and your sense of the environment around you—the room, the building, the town, the planet—let them all melt away. Arise from this spacious, skylike space, find yourself at the roof of the world, overlooking Lake Manasarovar, not far from the holy mountain, looking down from a grassy bluff, where you are comfortably and softly sitting, looking down on a jewel crystal lake. And the jewel crystal lake has a little lovely garden of an island sparkling there in front of you, and from this island springs a giant jewel tree made of agate and sapphire and ruby and emerald and diamond substance, and in that tree high up above you, above where your forehead is, sits the Lama Mentor, the being who to you represents the highest possible enlightenment, the greatest possible spiritual power, whether it be Buddha or God or Jesus or Muhammad, or the Goddess, or St. Teresa, or St. Francis, or Milarepa, or Tsong Khapa, or Padmasambhava, or Krishna, or Lao-tzu, or Socrates. Whoever it may be...

All the teachers who ever taught you are around you, as are all those whom you ever found inspiring in your life, and all the angelic beings you can imagine, the deities you can imagine. You can see God himself on his throne if it pleases you to meditate on that, or Goddess herself on her throne. Or you can see all these beings up on the branches of this giant jewel tree, sitting there glowing, sending down jewel-toned, laserlike, coherent light rays that flow to you like liquid elixir, flowing crystalline. The light tumbles down like a waterfall, a cascade of uplifting energy falling upon you and merging into you...this elixir of immortality, this buoyant, vibrant energy of wisdom. All these beings are smiling and glowing and happily greeting you there in your new meditation space, and as you fill up with their light, you no longer feel incapable, you no longer feel confused, you no longer feel depressed or anxious. Your habitual cycling thoughts waft out of you, and you feel buoyant and you feel luminous and you begin to share the luminosity of the refuge tree, and then you reflect on the beings around you—your loved ones, your neutral ones, your unloved ones. You reflect this light back out to them, and they feel aglow in your light, and they send you back grateful encouragement, and you send your gratitude back up to the refuge tree.

For now, we're in this special space, and we're our meditative self, our spiritually awakened and quickened self. So, now let's link up more powerfully with the jewel tree before turning our mind to the path of

enlightenment itself.

There are said to be seven limbs of communion, seven ways of connecting yourself with this jewel refuge tree. The first is the limb of saluting, where you salute your enlightened beings. You say, “All hail, Socrates. You who were said by the Delphic oracle to be the most enlightened person in the Hellenic world but felt that you knew nothing, so you went to inquire from others who said they were enlightened what they knew, and you found that it was all vain and hollow. And through that inquiry, then, you brought yourself and your whole culture as recorded by Plato toward enlightenment. Thank you very much. Keep working through your teachings to us today.”

And, “O Buddha, thank you very much for your great accomplishment of turning your heart inside out and seeing the world in a new way, from a nonegocentric perspective.”

And, “Thank you, Jesus, for showing the power of love and compassion, and how you could actually let hatred and prejudice take your body and put it on the cross and wrench it into bits and still arise from death and show that the power of love and wisdom is more powerful than even physical death.”

And, “Thank you, Krishna, for doing your *rasa leela*, your dance of adoration and your conquest of the evil king and your restoring of the world to sanity and to liberty.”

And, “Thank you, Lao-tzu, for revealing the Tao in flow and introducing us to its wondrous ways.”

And, “Thank you” to anyone else of whom you may think.

The *Mentor Devotion* text says:

Mentor like a gem embodied, diamond bolt,

Live compassion from the great bliss element,

You bestow in the fraction of a second

The supreme exaltation of the three buddha-bodies—

I bow to the lotus of your feet!

Primal wisdom of all victors of the buddhaverses,

Supreme artist, creating whatever tames each being,

Performer in the dance of upholding the monastic form—

I bow to your feet, O holy savior!

Eradicating all evil along with instincts,

Treasure of a measureless jewel mass of good,

Sole door to the source of all joy and benefit—

I bow to your feet, O holy mentor!

Teacher of humans and gods, reality of all buddhas,

Origin of the eighty-four thousand holy teachings,

Shining axis of the entire host of noble beings—

I bow to all you kindly mentors!

To the mentors in all times and places,

And all worthy forms of the Three Jewels,

With faith and devotion and oceans of praise,

I bow with bodies as many as atoms in the universe!

That's the limb of salutation. Next, we extend the limb of offering. You offer the world to the noble beings. You give away everything, even your own mind and body and thoughts. Give them away. Just give them up, let them go. Give them over to the beings of enlightenment.

To the noble mentor savior with your retinue,

I offer an ocean of various offering clouds;

From these well-arranged bright, broad jewel vessels

Four streams of purifying nectars flow.

Earth and sky are filled with graceful goddesses,

With beautiful flowers, garlands, and showering petals,

Delicious incense smoke adorns the heavens

With summer rain clouds of sapphire blue,

Masses of lamps lit by suns, moons, and radiant gems,

Shine ecstatic light rays to illumine the billion worlds;

Boundless oceans of fragrant waters swirl around,

Scented with camphor, sandalwood, and saffron.

Himalayas of human and divine food heap up,

Wholesome food and drink with a hundred savors;

The three realms resound with sweet melodies

From infinite specific varieties of music.

The outer and inner sensory goddesses

Pervade all quarters and present the glorious beauty

Of form and color, sounds, scents, tastes, and textures.

Going beyond these limited offerings, you move to give the entire world to the enlightened beings in the jewel tree. Picture yourself picking up the planet in your hand, as if you're a gentle, giant, spacious being seeing a beautiful green planet with the vision of the astronauts. You see the continents—North and South America, Africa, Europe, and Asia, Australia and the Polynesian Islands, the North Pole, the South Pole—the entire beautiful, glowing planet. Visualize that you take this planet reverently in your hands, and you hold it up and you offer the planet to the entire galaxy full of enlightened beings, to the wise, those who know the reality of the planet and of you and of themselves, and visualize that you hold it there.

By giving away the whole world, you offer it to the buddhas and bodhisattvas and to the enlightened beings and saviors and Jesus and Moses and Krishna. You stop worrying and nagging in your mind about the world, because after all, the world that you think you know, you know only from your perspective of being unenlightened, of being deluded, of seeing it from your narrow, egocentric perspective. So you give away whatever you know from that perspective, whatever you possess, whatever you feel you connect to, you give away the entire cosmos to the beings who see it from multiple perspectives, who see it in the enlightened way. That is a tremendous relief. Let them worry about it, this giving away.

The *Mentor Devotion* text says:

These hundred trillion four-continent, planet-mountain worlds,

With the seven major and seven minor jewel ornaments,

Perfect realms of beings and things that create great joy,

Great treasures of delight enjoyed by gods and humans—

O Savior, mercy-treasure, supreme field of offering,

My heart full of faith, I offer it all to you!

Next, we come to the limb of repentance. Because we have been afraid of this and that at times, because we have coveted this and that, and worried about this and that, we have done harmful things. We took something from someone, we injured a neighbor in some way, we spoke harshly to a friend, we spoke unskillfully, meaninglessly, or frivolously to a loved one. We were untrue with someone. All of the negative things that you have done—think about not doing them again. Lay them down. No longer defend and pretend, “Well, I might have done this and I might have done that, but, well, there was this excuse and that excuse.” Simply embrace that you did these improper things and set them down and resolve not to do them again. Lay them out in front of enlightened beings who are aware of them anyway...all the infinite angels who watch over us and seek to help us in our lives. Set them down, all these negative things, and resolve never again to return to them. Don’t just sit remorsefully and grind yourself in guilt about them. See through them. Let them disappear. Let go of them, but resolve nevermore to connect with them.

From beginningless time, whatever sinful acts

I did, had done, or rejoiced at others’ doing,

I repent before you, O Compassionate Ones,

Confess and solemnly swear never to do again!

Now, we come to the fourth limb, of rejoicing and congratulating. Think about the good things that you’ve done, and also the good things, especially, that others do, and their achievements, accomplishments, and enlightenments. Allow yourself to notice that when others do good things, you normally feel a little envious, a little left out. We think, “Why didn’t I do it? How come they did it? How come they had that success?” And whenever you think that, correct that thought, that envious thought that separates you from someone’s

good deed. Instead, rejoice in that good deed and think how great it is that that person did that. Think how good it is that at least one person has done it, at least she had that success, or at least he had that achievement. And genuinely rejoice from the depth of your heart at all the good things that other people do. Whenever you are rejoicing, you, too, share in the merit and the virtue and the glory and the pleasure of it.

Though things are naturally free from signs,

I heartily rejoice in all the dreamlike

Perfect virtues of ordinary and noble beings

That bring them all their happiness and joy!

And now we come to the fifth limb, of thinking about the beings above us. And we think, “They have knowledge, they know their reality and our reality, and this knowledge enables us to take refuge in them. Knowing our reality and their reality, they can teach us methods appropriate to ourselves to travel the path of enlightenment and the stages from wherever we are developing in whatever way we need. Through that teaching, we can come to a knowledge of ourselves.”

So, we request that the rain of Dharma fall from these enlightened beings. Think again of them there in the great jewel refuge tree that is all aglow and that lights us up in its radiance. You don’t have to visualize every branch and every leaf and every flower and every precious person, or even the exact details of the face of the beloved mentor, your main teacher. Don’t worry. Just know that they’re all there, and request them, “Please, give the teachings, make the teachings come alive in my mind, make me able to practice and perform them.”

The sixth limb is when you remember that these beings don’t need you. They don’t even need you to become enlightened. They know only that you need to become enlightened. But they are utterly transcendent. Their bliss is beyond everything. Even your state of unenlightenment is transparent to them; they are truly transcendent. They don’t even need to manifest a body to

you. They're not there doing that for their own pleasure or benefit or glory. They are absolutely aware of the uncreated, of the absolute, of Nirvana. And they do not even need to be present in this world. So, therefore, you should ask them to be present.

So you say, "Hey, Jesus, God, Buddha, Mary, as you sit there in your transcendent absolute state, be involved in the particulars of my relationality and my suffering and my confusion and my distortion and my isolation and my alienation, and manifest to me. Always stay with me. Be my friend. Be my protector. Be my teacher." In this way, you ask them to stay with you, all these spiritual beings and angels and deities and teachers, these enlightened teachers.

Though your diamond body knows no birth or death,

You treasure chest of buddhas self-controlled in union,

Fulfill my prayers until the end of time—

Please stay forever without entering Nirvana!

Finally, the seventh limb is the limb of dedication. Remember that everything you do, even thinking or visualizing being in the wish-granting gem tree field, is all done for more than your own sake. Because you are totally interconnected with all other beings, who are your mothers, in a sense, you're doing everything for everyone else. Any change in your mind, positive or negative, affects all others. The wish-granting gem tree is a morphic resonance field. The energy of one contains within it the energy of all. Every action affects all other actions. Whenever you turn your mind toward the wish-granting gems, everyone else's mind is turned in that way, too. The planet's mind turns with your mind. If you let your mind go in some negative, paranoid, self-indulgent, distracted way, the planet's mind turns in that way. You're totally interconnected with everything.

The mass of perfect virtue thus created,

I dedicate to stay with you, my Mentor, life after life,

To be cultivated by your threefold kindness,

To attain the supreme union of Vajradhara!

So, whenever you do anything or accomplish anything or gain a vision or have a little sparkle in your mind, don't appropriate it and think, How great, I've got this sparkle in my own mind. Dedicate it to others. Immediately share it with them. Just as the light flows in and fills you up from the gem tree of the deity beings, the divine mentors of the gem tree, it immediately reflects out from you as it fills you up. It flows from you to all the beings around you. And they fill up with the same light. You immediately share it and dedicate it to them.

Those are the seven limbs of interconnecting with the jewel tree and all its noble beings, energies, and intentions. It feels really good when you enter the refuge in this way. You can even do this in about two or three minutes. No matter how long it takes you, it is crucially important to help you prepare for the path. Each of us is a kind of Atlas, the poor demigod who had to hold up the whole planet Earth on his shoulders, his neck crunched uncomfortably under it. He's very strong, but he's holding up the world and so must be tired and in pain. All of us all the time are holding up the world like that. Even when you sit quietly, and for a moment don't think of any thoughts in your mind, you still have a subliminal, cosmological pattern in your mind that you're on planet Earth, that you're in such-and-such a town, that you're in such-and-such a building. Up is up and down is down. You have such-and-such a body, you have such-and-such a name, you're forty years old, and so-and-so is in the White House, so-and-so is in the UN. All these different terrible things have happened. Your parents are hither and thither. Your ancestors are hither and thither, your friends, your exes, your lovers. Everybody's all over the place.

As you're holding the huge world picture in your mind, you have a picture of yourself. You can see yourself as half-baked, you sometimes do right, you sometimes do wrong. Sometimes you feel good, sometimes you feel bad. You sort of know your limitations, you draw your lines, you can do this, you can't do that. You don't understand certain complicated things. This world picture fills and affects you.

So, the beginning of all meditations tries to loosen and lighten that world picture. Let it dissolve into space. Realize that any particular part of it, if you really investigate, you can't really verify. And so, you let it sort of float away. Let it melt. Let it ease up. You don't have to sustain it and support it. And, in fact, since you're seeking self-transformation, you can certainly decide that anything you see around you in the world may be your delusion. It may not be this way and that way. It may not be World War V. It may not be this or that or the other disaster area. It's just your own delusion creating that, to some extent. Let it go.

And now, borrow from the Tibetans' vision of the wish-granting gem tree and allow your own wish-granting gem field to grow. Visualize it. Imagine it. And if you can't visualize it in detail because you feel you can't visualize, hold a simple, stable picture in your mind. Just run over to it, to your tree. Remind yourself it's there. You're at the top of the world, looking at the lake. A tree springs out of the lake, a Jack and the Beanstalk type of tree, all made of jewels, with every mentor and angel on it, all radiating floods of light to you, buoying you up, and filling you up in that light, and around you all the beings of the light flowing out to them. Know that you're in that vortex. And suddenly, you're not your normal self. Suddenly, you're rising to the occasion. You're rising to the challenge. And the challenge is: Make some degree of transformation in your mind, because that will transform all the beings around you. That will please the enlightened beings, and they will feel relieved that you feel this relief.

So now, we come out of the jewel refuge visualization but not out of the field. You must continue to feel you're in the wish-granting gem tree field, luminously wound by skeins of luminous light rays, rainbow light rays. Always think of liquid gems, of emerald and ruby and diamond and topaz and sapphire, and just being wound with these beautiful strands of light that also fill up your mind and body. But as we go forward in this chapter, you don't have to sit in a formal way, or rigidly, or tire yourself. Try to stay awake, to think, because now we are on the first level of the path, taking the first steps of thought that we need to develop the transcendent attitude.

The first thing we must transform is our self-image, our view of what we are

as human beings. How we live our life is determined by what we think of ourselves as human beings. What is it that we are? Not only *who* am I—am I John Doe, or Jane Doe?—but *what* am I? What is my human life-form? What is a human being?

THE BUDDHIST VIEW OF HUMAN EVOLUTION

We were taught in school that we're made of cells, and those cells are made of atoms and energies, and that we're sort of randomly created by how our genes have developed from the genes of our parents. We're taught that all of this randomly mutated some time back, out of a sea of lifeless gases, that our genes came from the genes of apes and other beings, and we personally showed up here when the two seeds of our parents joined at our conception, and then we were born. Since then, we've been running around and, when our body stops, and our brain stops, and when our cells no longer function, then we die, and we cease to exist. This is what we think we are, at least in one side of our mind.

If we have some religious affiliation or spiritual tendency, we may think we have a soul that is a fixed thing, or one that is temporarily trapped here in this physical process. We may think that our soul gets taken away at our body's death by a deity or some other force and put in a nice place. In the West, even some of our wisest teachers normally think that that soul began with our birth into this life.

Now the Buddha's vision of the life process was very vast, huge. The Buddha saw, like Darwin, that we come out of a great ocean of evolutionary life-forms. Unlike Darwin, proponents of the big bang, or creationists, however, the Buddha didn't believe it was possible to say that there was any *first* beginning in one particular big bang, or an initial cosmic creation point, at which the world was created out of nothing. To him, that seemed senseless, illogical. It's meaningless to say that things were created out of nothing. Nothing is nothing, therefore it has nothing from which you can take something out. It is simply meaningless to say that something is created out of nothing. Things are created out of other things. This is our universal experience. From the Buddhist view, it is simply an incoherent use of language to say that something comes out of nothing. Therefore, the Buddha

saw that life was beginningless, the world was beginningless. It had always been going on. Things have always been something else and come from something else.

Why does a thing become a certain type of something? Why have we become human beings, embodied with body, mind, and speech? How did we get to be the way we are, from this beginningless time? Well, the Buddha looked, and he saw, as Darwin did, an evolutionary pattern. He saw that we adapt to our environment. He saw that we behave in a certain way: We reach in a certain direction, pick up a certain fruit, and begin to get a certain type of hand, a hand that is skillful at picking up the fruit. Darwin wrote that those who survive because of this adaptation pass on the trait genetically. The individual with the gene that gives the instructions to the cells to form into a certain type of hand that can pick up a certain fruit eats more of the fruits, gets stronger, and that strength favors that development within the species. The individuals are just examples of a species. They have no individuality, really; they are just carrying the genes of a species, according to Darwin.

The Buddha saw the same kind of evolutionary interrelationship with causation, but then he said, “For the individual who is experiencing himself as the giraffe, there’s a reason why he personally feels that he is a giraffe. His personal feeling about himself, his individual continuity, is part of reality. Therefore, the giraffe didn’t come from nothing. It cannot possibly have come from nothing. It has its own previous continuity. So, the mind has an infinite and beginningless continuity, as does the body.” Mind is always interwoven with body, but mind is somehow experienced as irreducible to body, and therefore, in its own stream of continuity, it is beginningless as well.

The Buddha developed a more complicated view of evolution than the materialist view. The Buddha saw that we personally have been embodied in various life-forms, life after life, from beginningless time. And we personally will continue to be embodied, in various life-forms, life after life, until endless time. The fact that we now are a particular form, in a human body, with a human intellect, and a human embodiment, is because we gravitated toward that form. We are attracted to that form, because we go toward what we are attracted to, because of our acts in previous lives, because of our

evolutionary experience. Just like the giraffe gets the long neck, just in that way we humans got to *like* being with certain senses, with eyeballs up on a skull, and ears flapping out on the sides of the skull, and nostrils in the middle of the skull, and a little mouth going *munch, munch*, and a tongue flapping around inside, two hands and feet, with little digits, fingers and toes, and different kinds of joints and things, capable of moving in this and that way, and skin that isn't very hard or armored but sort of light and permeable.

When we became mammals, we were able to understand the permeability of the boundary of self and other, because we grow our young within our bodies, and we unite with each other to create them. When we saw the permeability of inside and outside of the body, we developed the ability to imagine. We developed all these extra folds in our hard disk, or wet disk, or sloppy disk, our brain. With all these extra folds, we could envision an image, and imagine. In our imagining, we began to develop the ability to imagine what the other feels. We could empathize with other beings, and imagine being those other beings. We began to loosen ourselves from experiencing the world only through our own sense organs, from our own egocentric point of view, and we became able mentally to imagine and experience the world from others' points of view. Initially, our sensitivity would unfold for only the beloved, only the members of our species, only the child, the infant for whom we were caring. We would identify with them. But we became capable of imagining all of the beings, and representing all of them. Finally, we became able to become enlightened, feeling the feelings of all the other beings by means of a vastly expanded empathy.

We became human beings through developing these compassionate qualities, not through being successful aggressors. A successful aggressor, like the dinosaur or the tiger, is so successful within a certain structure of relation between self and other, and self and environment, that he doesn't have any impulse to transform himself. He sticks at that point to that place, eating what is in front of his face. Therefore, he is not so adaptable if the environment drastically changes. Yet because we couldn't compete with the tigers, mammoths, or rhinos, we had to go hide in a cave and figure out some multiple options. Somehow, actually *because* of our weakness, we figured out how to be more gentle. We began to chat with each other about our different miseries, and how we were being eaten by certain animals. And then

we began to think, “Well, gee, if we all got together, maybe we could surround the animal.”

We began to coordinate our activities, to develop technologies, and then we did become powerful aggressors—potentially destructive, in fact. Yet even though we are potentially aggressive, we didn’t achieve that ability through *being* aggressive, we achieved it by adapting to *failing* at aggression, from the Buddhist view. The human being develops to be human by generosity, by sensitivity to others, ethical sensitivity. This human, humane sensitivity expresses itself as tolerance, patience, and the ability not to react lethally to injury from others but to tolerate that, and then to sort of work it out with the others rather than just chomping them down.

From tolerance and patience grew our creativity, our imagination, our concentration, and our wisdom and broader knowledge of reality. These qualities are what we have as human beings. As human beings, we personally earned our “human being-hood.” Yes, our parents helped us by providing genes, but we were attracted to the form of our parents. We were able to be in love with our parents before we were born, because they did look beautiful to us, and they looked beautiful to us because we had developed the weird idea that it’s a wonderful way to be, to be a creature with a funny kind of a spine, and a head bobbing around with a bunch of slimeware in it, and senses, eyeballs and ears, and hands that can run around and do things with opposable thumbs. Our idea of a lovely way to be would not at all appeal to other life-forms—the lizard, for instance, wouldn’t think it was cute. But somehow we figured that our way was a playful, friendly, funny way to be. And, therefore, we were able to fall in love with those parents. So, we personally have earned this human life-form, by acts of generosity, ethical sensitivity, and empathy with others, primarily, and also by intelligence, concentration, and creativity.

When you inherit a bunch of stuff, easy come, easy go, you don’t necessarily pay attention to it; you take it for granted. But if you earn it, if you make it, if you build it yourself, then you really like it, you really appreciate it, because you made it yourself. You don’t want it to be taken away easily. Similarly, if you realize that you made your own body, you made your own body-mind complex, you created your own special human

sensitivity, and you did so through these self-transcending actions, like not immediately eating the first person you met, not immediately using someone else in some egocentric drive but learning to communicate with him, giving and conceiving something with him, getting along with her, communicating—if you realize this, you value your life even more.

To get to this life, you gave things away to others. You didn't grab everything for yourself. When others were a little harsh on you, you didn't freak out; you remained tolerant and patient—all self-transcending actions, which are difficult even though they are what makes us human. It is easier to follow those immediate impulses, greed and anger, of the self-centered instinct. Yet you developed the ability to stop that when you were a different type of animal. As an animal who sat there, and flicked your tongue, and grabbed a fly, you were instinctual. But to think, "Oh, that's a cute fly, I'll let that one go," that's transcendence. You didn't have the words to think about it as an animal; you weren't thinking about Buddha, or liberty, or evolving; you were just fascinated by the fly, how beautiful it was, and then you let one go without flicking that tongue to trap it. When you are a tongue-flicking lizard, it's not easy to get such an inspiration. And yet, we have all done that billions of times to have gotten here in this precious human embodiment that we have all earned. Even some great Western teachers have realized this. Herbert Spencer wrote, "Soul is the form and doth the body make."

When you think in this way, you can begin to be critical of all those meaningless cosmologies. You can't immediately just suspend your worldview and have a different one, but you begin to look at the boundaries of the worldview that you do have. Does it really make sense that mind came from nothing, or came from a cell at a certain moment, the way the materialists try to say that the illusion of sensitivity, the illusion of mind, just arises with a certain complexity of cells? You may as well say the mind just came from a table, or a stone, or a piece of dirt. Instead, we stand up for our awareness, and we say awareness always comes from awareness, and our awareness is something, it is who we are, and it is precious.

We can experience the most exquisite things. We have a special type of human embodiment. Of course, our awareness is also vulnerable, and we can suffer because of it. Look at the people who we know today live on this

planet. How many of them are starving to death right now, in some terrible ecological catastrophe inflicted by postcolonial, postimperialist exploitation of the planet, climate change, tribal dementia, prejudice, hatred, or disease? How many have no thought of liberation, except liberation from this immediate agony in front of them, or within them, or around them, and for their loved ones around them? How many beings are in that state? How many beings live in cultures where they are told just to follow the routine, fit in with the spirit, do what the collective wants them to do, what the witch doctor tells them, what the chief tells them, go out and kill their neighbor, with no thought of liberation? Maybe one shaman, or one person, goes somewhere else, but most of the people just fit in. How many beings even in a supposedly educated modern society just work in a factory from dawn to dusk, get a very poor education, have no job, and then commit a crime and go to prison until death? How many beings are there who are working endlessly in fields, eking out a living, or living as hunters in some vast snowy waste, just thinking about getting the next seal, with no time to reflect on liberation?

In India, before Buddha's time, in the time of the Vedas, there was no mention of liberation. People wanted power, wealth, duty, pleasure, progeny. Even the ancient songs of the Vedic people, for example, never talk of liberation. They just did what God wanted them to do, which meant then what the priests and the kings wanted them to do. Even today, many of us in our modern society just live mechanically, go to school, get our grades, graduate, go out, make money, have a family, pay taxes, do our duty, serve in the military, retire, then live in Florida and die. And that's it. They have nice lawns, and they hope that their heirs do better than they did. There's no meaning to that sort of lifelong pattern, finally, because that life ends. And even the different religions tend to annihilate your sense of personal spiritual continuity, inviting you to be a bland holy angel, waiting on God.

Why would you seek to transform yourself in life, in a really deep way, if there's no continuity? If you're a person who has sought her whole life long to transform herself, to become enlightened, do you have the same nothing at death as the person who has only sought to indulge himself his whole life long? If the person who does evil and gets away with it receives the same nothing at death as the person who does good and even suffers for it, why would you bother?

The modern world lives in a deep cosmology of meaninglessness. All of the traditional religions have really failed to control this general feeling of meaninglessness. They do provide some spiritual meaning when they say God wants you to do something, or God is doing this something for a reason, when they fit you under the inscrutable authority of God's will. But the operative, life-controlling idea is that reality is just material and basically meaningless. If you think you are basically meaningless, what do you really care for yourself? You will let yourself live your life, just making money, for example, saving it and hoarding it, and trying to be a big shot, dying with that, putting your whole life toward investing in something that you will lose.

Yet the supercomputer that is your brain is capable of realizing the kingdom of God within you, capable of realizing the great bliss state within you, according to the Buddha and all the awakened and enlightened teachers, including Jesus. But instead of turning your attention to that kind of total fulfillment of all of your wishes, and developing the ability to fulfill the wishes of others for an infinite future of enlightened living—instead of that, you just waste your life on some ephemeral thing that will not ever satisfy you and will just leave you at death. Who is satisfied with wealth when they accumulate it? No one, ever. They have \$100 billion, they want \$200 billion.

THE ENLIGHTENING STEPS OF THOUGHT

So, now that we know we have a meaningful view of life and can see its continuity and endlessness, we also come to the preciousness of our human life, which is endowed with liberty and opportunity. We cancel those views of meaninglessness; we just suspend them. We are critical of worldviews that say, "This is the law of nature, this is the law of reality, and that's where you fit, and that's all you can do." We don't necessarily accept that. If we have an instinct or an intuition that we have something in us that can flower, that we could really be fulfilled, that we could achieve a kind of bliss that would be deep and upwelling from within and that would be a reservoir of joy for others as well, we let that come out. We realize, this lifetime is the time that we can do that.

My liberty and opportunity found just this once,

Understanding how hard they are to get and how quickly lost,

Bless me not to waste it in the pointless business of this life,

But take its essence and make it count!

The liberty that we have is the liberty from immediate suffering and an oppressive environment. The Buddha taught us the eight liberties and the ten opportunities,^{*} the most important of which are having freedom to pursue your own spiritual evolution consciously and having access to enlightened beings, to great saviors, to great spiritual leaders, to great saints, who can inspire you to fulfill yourself in this life, as a human being. And the jewel tree is one of the teachings that gives you that access.

When we reflect on this preciousness of our human life, endowed with liberty and opportunity, we find a new level of appreciation of ourselves. At this very point, we start on the Buddhist path, on the path to enlightenment, the Tibetan path, with the realization that our life is precious. All enlightened discourses—Burmese, Sri Lankan, Zen—describe how precious you are, you, a human being, because you can become enlightened. Reflect on this, and then think about yourself and how you spend your life. How much do you do that is valuable for you? What do you have to do that is just dishing something out to make a living? If you could combine some generous gesture toward others with that dishing out to make a living, some cheerfulness that you convey with the food you give, or service you provide, however you interact with others, then you're doing something for yourself and for them in the process of making your livelihood. And that is wonderful.

Anything that you do just to earn money, however, keeps you from your true self and happiness. You spend that money on a house, then you get greedy and want a bigger house, and you have to spend more, and waste more time, and you sleep half the time anyway. How much of this precious quality time that you have, evolutionarily speaking, as a human being, with a human intelligence, do you spend on using that human intelligence to understand yourself, to understand your world, to understand others, to understand reality, so that you can transform yourself and find your true happiness? How many minutes out of a twenty-four-hour day do you invest

in yourself in that way? You'll be shocked if you actually take inventory. I am shocked, constantly, by how much time I waste, with this precious body that I have, whose time is running out. That's the first thing. True self-appreciation, not a fake self-love, that is, "I'm great because I'm rich, I'm great because I'm beautiful, I'm great because I went to Harvard, I'm great because I'm American, I'm great because I'm male, or I'm great because I'm female." All these superficial identities, the kind of false pride in them, are not real self-love, because in them we are really not appreciating our own vastness.

Each of us is potentially an infinite being. Each of us has been an infinite being, has an infinite past experience, evolutionarily speaking. Each of us has been a god, actually. And now, as humans, we have the opportunity to become more than humans or gods. We can become perfectly enlightened beings, the summit, the peak of evolution. That form of life, at the end of all possible culmination of evolution, that is perfect compassion, meaning the perfect ability to feel others' feelings, and perfect wisdom, to help them feel better, knowledge of our self and others' reality, so that we can help them feel better. This is what we can become: bliss indivisible.

That is the first step of thought on the path of enlightenment. Once you begin to cultivate a deeper sense of self-appreciation, cherish yourself and take care of yourself every moment, expand your understanding and intelligence, and use this time of infinite malleability that is the human form, the human lifetime, to its maximum meaningfulness, then you have to reflect realistically on where you are headed.

Here, for the second thought step on the path of enlightenment, we turn to something that at first may seem disturbing but in fact is vastly liberating. We turn to the topic of death. It's a big note. And you have three vibrations within this note of reflecting on death. In the first you reflect on the surety, the certainty, the absolute certainty you can have that you personally will die.

My liberty and opportunity found just this once,

Understanding how hard they are to get and how quickly lost,

Bless me not to waste it in the pointless business of this life,

But take its essence and make it count!

At first you may think, “Well, why do I do this? Everyone knows that he will die.” But if you really reflect and meditate on death, you will realize that you are carrying on as if you are going to be here forever. I know I do. Bob Thurman, this body, a slowly decaying form of this body, but still basically this body, with this mentality, personality, education, background, brain, body limbs, senses. It will always be like that, so I can go and meditate tomorrow, next year. When I retire, I’ll really take this seriously, and transform myself, control my temper, control my obsessions, later, because I will be here forever, basically. I’m sort of assuming that it will always go on like this. So, when I begin to reflect that I am going to die, I realize that I will *not* go on like this.

Now, that doesn’t mean that something will not go on, some continuity of consciousness. Certainly I know that the body will go on, and it will become fertilizer. Or it will become fuel, if it is cremated, and then heat waves in the atmosphere. So, the body will go on, in some continuity. And consciousness will go on, it seems sensible to declare, because just as something cannot come from nothing, it makes no sense for something to go into nothing. Something will always transform into another realm and become something else. Something cannot become nothing and sort of blank out. Everything that we’ve seen—all of our experience in nature and rational theories, even according to the law of conservation of energy in physics, for example—indicates that something never becomes nothing. It always becomes something else.

But the point is that I, as I am conceiving myself, as a body-mind complex, Bob Thurman, that will cease, that will die. Even Buddha died, in his form as Shakyamuni. Jesus died. Jesus rose from the dead, was resurrected, but he died on earth as a human being. Even gods die, in the Buddhist perspective, insofar as you see the god as some sort of embodiment. A transcendent, absolute body, what they call *dharmakaya* or truth body in Buddhism, doesn’t die; or absolute godhead, as they may say in Christian theology; or the nameless, absolute as they may say in Judaic theology;

Nirguna Brahman, unqualified Brahman, as they would say in Hindu theology; the absolute Tao, as they would say in Chinese theology—that form doesn't die, but neither does it live in the normal sense that we understand vitality. As an embodiment, it's beyond all embodiment, and uncreated, and uncompounded, and therefore can be eternal, like space. But anything creative, such as an embodiment made of parts and pieces that are separated from the rest of the world, will dissolve again. The pieces come together, and they go apart.

So reflect on the fact that you will die. It is a good thing to do. Western thinkers as well as Eastern sages have realized this. E. M. Forster, for instance, wrote, "Death destroys a man, but the idea of death saves him." You can do it as a kind of subtraction meditation; there you are, you have your relationships, and your friends, and your possessions, and your house, and your property, and even your knowledge, and your memories. But then, these are all lost. Look how we cannot remember our previous lives, can't even remember many things that happened in this life. It all gets lost. We will die, so in our meditation we sort of subtract our self, the self-image or identity that we're pushing forward in the world. We do this now because it will get subtracted. It gives up, it loses control, it dies, we die, you die, I die.

The second root consideration is when we think, "Well, when will I die?" And then, we realize there is no knowing when we die. Just as we definitely know that we will die, we definitely know that we *don't* know *when* we will die. We could die anytime. When we connect this uncertainty about when we will die with this certainty that we will die, it gives a great sense of intensity to the moment. We realize that this moment could be the last, any moment could be the last. This means that we should savor, we should seek the vastness in this moment. It's useless to scheme and plan, "Oh, when I do this, I'll have the other." If I'm expending a lot of energy, anxiety, and expectation on some temporal, temporary thing, it is useless, because I could die. Being healthy, young, and rich are no guarantees—well people can die before sick people. Young people die before old people. Rich people die before poor people. People who live in a secure, safe surrounding can have an accident and die before people who live in a dangerous place. So, there is no certainty about when and where death will come and claim us. We cannot feel certain about it, if we are reasonable and realistic.

The third root consideration about death is that, when we do die, only the Dharma will help us, only truth will help us, only reality will help us, only our knowledge and incorporation of the nature of reality will help us. Now that we have become aware of what the dying process is like, we realize that when we do die, only those qualities of generosity, ethical sensitivity, tolerance, creativity, concentration, meditation, wisdom, and intelligence that we have integrated into our soul will go with us. These qualities do not go with us, however, if we treat them as something we can acquire from a rote formula in which we just repeat some words. These qualities are not some sort of accomplishment or some laurels upon which we can rest. We create these qualities by having been generous, by having been sensitive to others, by having been tolerant, by having been creative, by having been focused and concentrated, by having been wise and intelligent. We turn them into a code in our soul, into a spiritual gene that will go with us to build another embodiment.

That spiritual genetic pattern will be attracted to another life-form, but that is the only thing that goes with us at death. Nothing else is of benefit. Our possessions are not of any benefit. We cannot take our bank account, our car, our house, our land. Our physical body cannot go with us. Our relationships, our loved ones, our friends, cannot go with us. Fame, status, power, authority cannot go with us. All of that is left behind. Any investment that we have made, that is all gone at death. It comes to nothing. Only the investment we make in the deepest inner quality of our being goes with us. This means, of course, that any good act that we did goes with us. For example, if we give a generous gift, that giving benefits us—not because we gave a hundred dollars to such-and-such, but because we liked that hundred dollars, we wanted to keep it, but we let go of it and we gave it over to someone. That habit of giving it over, and finding even pleasure in that giving over, creates a sort of loosening, a lightening of the soul in the subtle mind, the seed mind. And that seed mind is the seed of our future life.

You don't have to go to an astrologer or soothsayer to find out what your future life is going to be. "Will I be born a yogini? Will I be in Tibet? Will I be in heaven?" To find out where you will be in your future life, look at the seed of your mind today. What is the deepest inner part of your mind, when you get away from all of your surface distractions? What is down inside

there? Is it a joyful, happy spirit? Is it an open and loving spirit? Is it a bubbling well of positive energy? If it is, then that is the place where you will be in the future. You will dwell in the well of positive energy. However, if you find in there a little lump of fear, of paranoia, of anxiety, of unconcern, a withered, neglected sort of thing that doesn't know this from that, that is confused and terrified, and hiding, then, unfortunately, you will be in a realm of confusion, terror, and fear. In short, changing this deepest inner quality should be the main focus of our life.

These are the three root thoughts that help us through death and help our next existence: the certainty of death; the uncertainty of the time of death; and the certainty that when we die, it is this inner seed that is all-important. When we follow these three root thoughts, we will rise to what is called awareness of the immediacy of death. Far from being morbid, far from being depressed and paranoid, we become transcendent. We become deeply intense about this moment. We recognize that this moment is everything. The seed of our being, all our future states, the product of all our past states, infinity stretching in both directions, infinite expanses in both directions, is now here in this moment, and this moment begins to become more and more infinite. We find more and more fruition in this moment, especially when we know already how deeply wonderful the human life is. We see what a great opportunity for freedom this life is, especially since each moment of it could be the last.

What is essential in each moment is the quintessential experience of that moment. When we know this in the deepest part of the soul, then we begin to have a soul life. We begin to have soul intensity in life.

THE TRUTH OF KARMA

We've gone through the first two steps of the path: the recognition of the preciousness of human life, which is endowed with liberty and opportunity, and the awareness of the immediacy of death. As you go on in your lifelong retreat, you can spend days, months, and years reflecting on each one of these. You can bring them into your study of biology, history, and natural history, into your experience of life. So, you want to meditate on them at all times, not only in times of retreat.

Now we move to the third step of thought on the path of enlightenment, which is the theme of the inexorability of the cause and effect of evolutionary action. In this one, we increase still more our sense of intensity, immediacy, and infinity of the moment. We sense the preciousness of the moment, in order to invest in our deepest inner spiritual transformation.

Fearing the fires of suffering in hellish states,

I heartily take refuge in the Three Jewels,

Bless me to intensify my joyous efforts

To give up sins and achieve a mass of virtue!

We are being developed by what we have done, and what we do, not only physically and verbally, but mentally also. What we now do in mind and speech and body will determine how we will become. The different forms and idiosyncrasies of all beings and all things—all worlds in fact—depend on this inexorable causality of evolutionary action, or karma. Karma is not mysterious. *Karma* doesn't mean "fate," although in a way it occupies the place of fate. *Karma* means "evolution, evolutionary causality."

For example, if you have killed many beings in past lives, then you get a shorter life, you get a difficult existence, you end up in subhuman states of existence, of fear and crystallized paranoia, and agony and killing and destruction. If you have taken what is not given, you get a very spare and sparse environment, you suffer and you starve, and you're poor, and you never have sufficiency in quantity, because you took away from others in previous lives. If you commit sexual misconduct, you become ugly, and you become out of control, you lose control of yourself, and you're exploited and abused by others, and so forth in other lives. If you tell untruths, then in your future life you become someone whom no one believes or trusts; what you do and say is felt to have hidden motives, to be exploitive of others; you're always confused, and you don't know what is true and what is untrue.

This ethical law in Buddhism is like a law of nature, like a law of biology. For instance, if you train as a runner and you run five miles a day,

then your legs become strong. That doesn't happen because somebody rewards you with strong legs. The running itself changes the structure of the muscle, the leg, and you become stronger and stronger. No pain, no gain. That's the cause and effect that we understand in material reality. In a karmic or evolutionary reality, whatever we do and what we say and what we think affects how we become. Ethics is actually a way of maneuvering through the causation of life toward better forms of life. Negative ethics, or doing bad things, is a way of maneuvering backward, regressing, and degenerating our form of life.

We do not kill other beings, for example, not just because someone orders us not to kill beings, although if a reliable person ordered us not to, it would be all right to follow his or her orders. However, if you don't do something only because you're obeying someone, in some situations you might do it because you think you can get away with it; you disobey and do it because you think you can. But if you don't do it out of inner restraint, because you know that the act is going to transform your being in a negative way, you will never want to do it in any situation. If you do not take others' lives, you yourself will have a vaster existence, a more generous, more open existence. If you prolong other beings' lives, you will have a longer life. If you act out of such understanding, enlightened self-interest combines with your ethical sensitivity, and they reinforce each other. Learning about the inexorability of ethical action, the law of karmic evolution, resembles the study of biology.

If I have a happy moment in my life today, it is because I did a positive thing in a previous life, or a previous time in this life. If I have a miserable moment today, it is because I did some miserable thing to someone else, or to myself, in a previous time. Understanding this dynamic, we develop a very minute sense of responsibility, of how we behave, of what we do, and we don't blame others for the negative events that happen to us. We accept responsibility ourselves. This acceptance doesn't result in self-laceration, or self-belittling, but rather gives us responsibility and the power to do something about it. If something happens to us, even an accident, and we just sit and bewail our fate, then we're only heightening our sense of powerlessness. Instead, when an accident occurs, we should think, Well, I was in the way of that accident, and thus put our focus on what we can do.

Many people think, Well, I didn't exist before I was born, and I won't exist after I die, because material science says that when there's no brain function, there's no awareness. But actually, if you were to accept those views that a vast infinite past is nothing and an infinite future is nothing, then that would mean that right now there is also nothing. Take this as an example: Say you are an ardent materialist who thinks that at death you will not exist; you will be undifferentiated, nonindividuated oblivion. If you come to a moment of great agony in the present, if the now suddenly is filled with immense agony—because you have a cancer, or because you have broken something or have been disgraced, or because you're on fire—then it would be rational for you to take a bullet and blow your brains out. And as the bullet goes through the brain, you would be thinking that the essence of the present moment will be revealed as nothing. You think that the essence of this present is a black hole, it is a nothing, it is a radical singularity of a black hole. For you, caught in that view, the “now” is nothing but being a nothing.

However, if you face the fact that nothing is nothing only, and therefore is not an object of experience, it's not a location where you can be, it's not a place where you can hide. If you are experiencing what you are thinking is nothing as nothing, then you're really experiencing a “realm” of nothingness that you mentally have conjured. You have made something out of nothing. You made it, and you are dwelling in it, so it is a mental fabrication, not a nothing.

It is very powerful to become minutely and deeply aware of the causal processes of evolution, because thereby we become more and more aware of the interconnectedness of ourselves with everything else. Everything we do is infinitely ramified and interconnected with everything else. And everything else becomes infinitely connected and ramified with us. This realization is crucial to our positive development.

The title of *Be Here Now*, the book written by our beloved Baba Ram Dass, has become a motto that resounds through our culture. “Being here now” challenges our culture's tendency to defer gratification to retirement or life after death. Instead, get something out of your life now. Be present to reality now. Enjoy and appreciate things now, because now is where you live.

But we must be careful here. If you really integrate in your mind the

preciousness of life and the immediacy of death, really understand them, and gain insight into them, you will be here now, totally, intensely. But, then, how will you define the now? If the now is just a nothingness, essentially, because you have an image in your mind that you didn't exist before you were born, and because you have a picture in your mind that you will cease to exist after you die, then the essence of the now is that you are nothing. If you reduce everything to what is its deepest essence now, that deep essence will be revealed as nothing. Your awareness will be revealed as an illusion, some sort of surface consciousness. And the deeper consciousness will just be nothing, oblivion. It's what's called a realm of nothingness.

So, what is the now that you're being here? What is the here? It's nothing. The now is nothing. So, what do you have? Nothing.

But if you connect this with the inexorability of causation, of evolution, you couple this with the vast ocean of interrelationships, and everything is a vast surface of interconnections, you and all beings infinitely interwoven in an infinite fabric of life, then the moment is as infinite as you can expand your awareness to encompass. For example, right now, if you have a very tiny little flicker of thought, of the wish-fulfilling gem tree reality, of the predominate power within relationality of love and compassion, and light and luminosity, and jewel tenderness, and intimacy, the tiniest imaginative flicker of that vision can expand infinitely to become that, in billions of worlds, resonating in billions of consciousnesses of other beings.

By contrast, if you have an infinite flicker of mind of darkness and fear, harshness, and hardness, and nothingness, then that can lead you to such realms of darkness, and you can drag many beings with you, and imprison yourself in a nothingness realm for infinity or aeons. So, this moment is infinity. The energy that you have to turn away critically, to see through the delusion of anything negative in this moment, and create a positive in this moment, even in the minutest way, has infinite consequence. The moment and your positive action are, in a way, infinite.

A famous verse from the *Royal Samadhi Discourse* (a *sutra* or sacred scripture of the Buddhists) says that one who understands causality understands emptiness. One who understands emptiness understands freedom. And one who understands freedom understands the importance of

the minute, and is mindful of the most minute detail.

We tend to think that there is some ultimate state that we hope to achieve to get away from all this suffering, that there will be someplace outside the world, some sort of vast infinity that will not have any differentiations. But we'll be there and then nothing can harm us, and we'll be secure and safe, and we can ignore every kind of minute thing because we will become vast and infinite. In our escapism, in our fear, we reify states such as that as being states of liberation and enlightenment.

But when we really realize the ultimate as the void, we gain the absolute freedom of the realization of the void. That freedom is also free from itself as a separated state. That freedom is free to be invested in the most minute infinities, the infinity in a grain of sand, the infinity in a petal of a flower, the infinity in the tip of a hair, the infinity of the tone and the timbre of the tiniest gentleness that can be extended to another, that can alleviate his tension, her suffering the tiniest bit, that can open another's happiness the tiniest bit. Compassion infinity, not just wisdom infinity, invests in every being's happiness.

So, that is the third step of thought on the path—the interconnection of all our thoughts and actions and their infinite effect. The first step is the preciousness of our human life, endowed with liberty and opportunity, and the second is the immediacy of death. And in this third step, the intensity of every moment of that human life and the fruitfulness of every moment get linked with the infinity of time and space. Instead of our being isolated in some sort of a dull, disconnected moment, in a sort of solipsistic hiding in some form and some place apart from others, we are connected to an infinite past and an infinite future. There is no beginning or end to our being here. This makes our *now* of infinite significance. The way we are here now with other beings is optimal and positive. It is leading to happiness, satisfaction, and freedom, not to bondage, misery, frustration, or suffering.

HAPPINESS COMES FROM REALIZING YOU ARE NOT “THE ONE”

These three steps of thought, the preciousness of human life endowed with

liberty and opportunity; the immediacy of death, and therefore, the intensity of the moment; and the interconnectedness of cause and effect of evolutionary action, the interwovenness of all things, the infinite past, present, and future—all bring us, finally, to the fourth step of thought on the path, the overall suffering of egocentric or unenlightened existence.

Tossed by fierce waves of evolution and addiction,

Crushed by the sea monsters of the three sufferings,

Bless me to intensify my will to liberation

From this terrifying, boundless ocean of existence!

Here we come up against what the Buddha called the First Noble Truth, the truth of suffering. People who misunderstand this truth think of Buddhism as pessimistic or gloomy and of the Buddha as a killjoy, some guy who comes up when you're slurping down a delicious vanilla fudge ice cream and says, "All this is suffering." We don't like to hear this when we're slurping down that ice cream. But, we have to understand it.

When the Buddha said, "All this is suffering," what he meant—and did say in many other contexts in which he was being more elaborate—is that all this unenlightened living is bound to be suffering compared to enlightened living, which is infinite bliss. If the Buddha had thought that this suffering was inevitable—that all of life would only and always be suffering—he would have kept silent. Why would you tell someone who is imprisoned for life how horrible his situation is, if there's no chance of his gaining any freedom? Buddha was actually saying, "You're imprisoned under this-and-that confusion," so that we would seek to understand what's imprisoning us, so that we can become free.

The Buddha's good news, the Buddha's great insight, is the Third Noble Truth, that there is freedom from suffering. There is an end to suffering. Everyone knows that there is suffering, so the First Noble Truth is not really news. What is news is that there is an end to suffering that we can realize, that it is only the *unenlightened* life that is suffering.

We can easily understand suffering. What is the cause of suffering, as the Buddha saw it? It is our attachment, the Second Noble Truth, to absolute beliefs. Everyone, here and now, thinks that he or she here and now is it. I think I'm it. As my great old Mongolian teacher used to say, everyone secretly thinks, "I am the one." He and she may claim to be very friendly and cooperative, selfless and altruistic, but inside they really think, "I am the one." Actually, everyone *is* the one. But when you think you are the only *real* one, you immediately are paranoid, because you immediately know that nobody else agrees with you. In fact, you think they are so messed up, all those foolish other people, they all think *they* are the one. And you know that's for sure wrong, just as they know you are for sure wrong. But knowing that they think you're for sure wrong makes you paranoid.

Descartes, remember, was certain that he was sitting there thinking and doubting. That was the absolute foundation of certainty for him, he couldn't question that. He doubted everything else, that he had a body, that the world had definite qualities, but he was there thinking, he did not doubt that. And we all feel that way.

When you think your self is the most absolute thing, the one irreducible thing, what sort of situation does that put you in? I, myself, all alone, am the only one. The whole world disagrees with me. All the other people think they are the one. I'm just grist for their mill, fodder for their meal. Naturally, I'm in conflict with all of them. And, besides being in conflict with them, I am also in conflict with time itself. Time comes to me eventually in the form of death, and says, "You're not the one, you're dead." It comes to me in the form of sickness, says, "You're not the one, you're sick. You don't know what you are." It comes to us in the form of old age, when we change; it comes when we don't even know who we are, in Alzheimer's.

Everything is against my feeling of "I'm so it. I'm the universe." My whole universe is I, but the universe doesn't agree. So, everything I do is doomed to failure. Pit yourself in a struggle against the universe, and who will win? You will lose. That is what Buddha is saying to us when he says that all this is suffering. He means this struggle of the egocentric person who thinks he is in conflict with the world, and his certainty of identity is suffering. With such an absolutized foundation of egocentrism, his

progression through the world will always be suffering. Other people won't agree with him, he'll lose his loved ones, he'll meet his hated ones. He'll be tortured by others. Death and birth will torture him. He'll face sickness and old age.

Now, if this were the only way we could be, Buddha wouldn't have brought it to our attention. He would have said that we have to make the best of it; we have to figure out how to bear with this suffering. If he had gone through his time, and his investigation of self, and of the world, and his deep insight, and his deep concentration, his scientific exploration, if he had decided, "Well, that's just the way beings are, there's no way of getting out of that wiring, we're hardwired to think we're the one, and so we're inevitably pitted against the world, and it against us, no way out of it"—he would not have created the enlightened path. If he had thought, "We have to resign ourselves to our lack of freedom or modulate it by palliative measures," then there would be no such thing as Nirvana. There would be no Buddhadharma, Buddha teaching, Buddha path, enlightenment path. There would be no freedom.

But Buddha did look, and he saw through the suffering, and he took up the challenge. He said, "Well, if I'm the one, and I put my absolute effort of being the absolute one into finding my absolute self, then I should find it, because absolute is not to be obstructed, absolute is what is real. Reality will come through if it puts itself out to do so." So, he looked for himself as "the one." He put laser-like, diamondlike, nuclear fission-like energy into finding himself. And you know what? He failed to find himself. He didn't find anyone. He also didn't find a failure to find. He didn't find "nothing" as the one. He didn't find that what the one was reduced to was a nothing. He saw through the delusion of nothing, the escape hatch of nothing. He dived right through it and realized that nothing was itself just like a pane of glass, just transparent, because it couldn't obstruct everything. So, he didn't find the failure to find and he didn't find the self. And the not finding of the self, courageously sustained, became the realization of the transparent openness of the self, the emptiness of the self, and the infinity of the self. The self, the sense of "the one," became diffused over the entire, infinite universe, and he realized that he was all of the beings being "the one." He suddenly felt himself as the universe.

Now, there is a difference between what the Buddha felt and the feeling you can get that you and the universe are all dissolved in some big nothing. The latter is a fake, mystical, irrational state, even though you can experience it. But it's not the absolute. The Buddha rejected again and again that kind of altered state or *samadhi* as being the absolute. He rejected it because it's not the absolute, because it's a state you go into, in which you are isolated from other beings of the world. In that state, you cross a boundary between a place out of which you came and the state in which you are. A state that has a boundary is therefore not an absolute. It is a state that didn't exist before and later comes to exist; therefore, it is created by cognitive effort, so it is not an absolute.

The absolute, by definition, is infinity, but you could not go now from being in a finite realm into infinity, because infinity could not be excluded from the finite realm in which you once were. Infinity is infinite, therefore nothing can limit it, it has no boundary, so it has to be everywhere. All the "somethings" also have to be infinity, actually. Finitude and interconnectedness are, in fact, the surface of infinity; they're the surface texture of infinity. Similarly, in the world of interrelationships of others and selves, as all interrelated and inconceivably intertwined, relativity is the absolute, is the freedom, is the emptiness. This is what the Buddha realized.

When you are in the Buddha's feeling of being the universe, suddenly you realize you are not against the universe, you *are* the universe. Your universe is specifically other people in the universe. Therefore, when they think they are the one and they have happiness, that's your happiness. You and they are one being, you identify with all of them. You feel their feelings as your feelings, and they're not against you, and your bliss radiates into them as their bliss, and when many of them become blissful it radiates back from them, into a much greater bliss than you individually could even conceive. When we're imprisoned within the self-enclosure of self-preoccupation and egotism, and seeing the world only from my—the one—perspective, and feeling alienated from the universe and separated from it, any state of existence that we have controlled by that perspective, controlled by that imprisonment of self-preoccupation, will be suffering.

The purpose of this theme, the fourth thought step on the path, is to free

ourselves from ambition for any self-centered state as a desirable state, an ultimately desirable state. In other words, we give up the ambition to become a god, which we define as a being that is greater than the universe, and different from the universe, and still, therefore, in a sense, finite in relation to an infinite universe. Because even the vastest god, in relation to a particular galaxy or universe, in relation to the infinite multiverse, the infiniverse, is still like a firefly, like a mosquito, like a tiny grain of dust. Even a god is crushed, nothing but a subatomic particle in the toenail of another god in a different dimension. Even a god who is born into heaven based on generosity and love and joy, which the heavenly realms are made of, because the god enters that state at a certain time, he or she will lose that state at another time. Without realizing it in their giddiness of pleasure and joy, the gods roll over and crush a couple of universes in between bouts of lovemaking; and in crushing those universes, they create a negative karma, a negative evolutionary impetus, very, very subtly, that attaches itself to their souls, and eventually that's the seed of their downfall from the heavens. And they become human beings again or subhuman beings, and they suffer in the future.

Any egocentric being, from the hells to the heavens, is pitted against the infinite, and he or she always loses in the end. So here we meditate on this, and we inventory all possible conceivable forms of self-centered existence. Take the social world, being president of the United States, being a superstar in Hollywood, being a great artist and performer, Picasso, being Jackson Pollock, being whatever you can think of as an ambition you could have about a worldly state in the human realm. Reflect, look at the president of the United States, what a suffering. Look at a great performer, a great violinist as his or her fingers become arthritic, what a suffering. And, the most difficult, look at the gods, the pleasures of the gods, which in the Indian imagination, the Indo-Tibetan imagination, are incredibly delicious from a human sensory perspective, but nevertheless, if you see time, if you see the passing of an aeon as like a moment, when you come to death, after even a 150-year life, it's like the whole thing has been a dream, over in a flash. At the end of it, although it may have seemed long and laborious at times along the way, it's as if you had just awakened from a dream. All of life is like a moment.

So, even if you live a billion aeons, like a god's life, at the end it's like a

momentary thing, and you fall. And they say that the gods become clairvoyant a few god-weeks or god-months before they die, which is like a billion years in our time, because the god time is very slow compared to ours, very vast, and the agony they experience in those few god-months, which are a billion aeons of our time, makes the whole trillions and quadrillions of years they lived as gods meaningless. It's hard for us, as pleasure-oriented people, to think of heaven as a suffering, but it's necessary, to free ourselves from longing for paradise.

There's an old Buddhist wisdom story about a man who was born blind with a film over his eyes. This man would argue with his friends about whether light or colors, or even the sun, moon, and stars existed, because he had never seen them. His friends argued that they had seen these things, so he should believe in their existence, but he was unmoved and argued back that if colors or light really existed, he would be able to touch them just as he could touch other things that he knew to exist. He told his friends that what they saw had to be illusions because they couldn't be touched. Then one day, a physician visited the blind man, mixed four medicines, and put them on the man's eyes. The medicines melted the film, curing his blindness, so that he could see reality in all its forms and colors. It is taught that the Buddha is the physician to all of us; the man's blindness is the illusion, and the four medicines are the Four Noble Truths.

These are four themes that we have gone through, in the very briefest detail: one, the preciousness of human life endowed with liberty and opportunity; two, the immediacy of death and the spontaneity and intensity of the moment; three, the inexorable, causal interconnectedness of our infinite past and future with our present evolutionary involvement; and four, the unsatisfactory quality of all egocentric states of existence, even the most seemingly vast and glorious and expanded.

When we really accept these four themes and gain insight into our life and others' as you now are doing by tasting just the tiniest drop of them all together, we feel tremendous relief. Far from being depressed, far from feeling morbid or discouraged, we feel terrific relief. Why? When you no longer desire to be a god, or the president, or a billionaire, or a star, or

whatever it is, when you realize the sufferings of all of those conditions by thinking them over carefully, then you won't waste your time trying to become them. You won't invest in those futile, vain ambitions or goals. You will realize they will not bring you happiness. You realize that happiness comes from knowing your true nature, from feeling your inner bliss of freedom.

As for this egoistic life cycle, intolerable prison,

I give up my delusion that it's a garden of delight;

Bless me to educate myself in ethics, meditation, and wisdom,

The treasures of the jewels of noble beings,

And raise aloft the victory banner of true liberation!

You realize that your precious moments of human life, each one of which has infinite effects, and each one of which is never lost in its impact, because of the inexorable causality of everything, you realize that you may as well be free in mind now. You should orient, and reorient, and restructure your life. To be free, you drop out, in a way. You become "transcendental." You renounce the conventional, routine egocentric cosmology and living in the uneasy truce with all the other egocentric beings. You leave that society as your home. You abandon it. You abandon that world, and you enter the world of the wish-granting gem tree, the world of individual liberation, the world of individual fulfillment. You put the full energy of every moment, bit by bit, as much as you can, into the transformation of your soul, the opening of your soul. The chrysalis, butterfly expansion and flight-taking of your soul—that is where you put the focus of your life. You declare to yourself, "I don't know what the meaning of life is, perhaps, yet. I don't know fully what reality is yet, but I'm encouraged enough by the alternatives that I have heard from the karmic evolutionary scientific tradition, from the enlightenment psychology tradition, that I will determine to make my life meaningful, whether so-and-so says it's meaningful or not. It will become meaningful for me. I will create the meaning. And that meaning will be love. It will be joy. It will be infinite positivity. It will be the meaning for me, and for all other

beings. That is the meaning that I will make for it. And I give up getting a million bucks. I give up being a big shot. I give up being controlling of the world. I give up possessions, all of these things. I give that up. I don't mean that I want to fling myself into the street. Then I would be a burden on others, and I wouldn't have a chance to study." Actually, in ancient India and Tibet, I could have just flung myself in the street, but when I really reached this "warrior's abandon," as Carlos Castaneda's Don Juan would have called it, when I reached "transcendent renunciation," as the Tibetans call it, the determination to transcend, I could just go out and yell, "Eureka, I am released, I am not after any of this. You guys keep all of it, except please share a little lunch with me once a day." You have a begging bowl. You live as a mendicant. You're shining with relief.

In the enlightenment-oriented civilizations, the monastic male and female monk and nun, the vacationing mendicants, are considered to have received a great boon, a great happiness. The word for ordination is not *ordination*, it is *graduation, liberation, escape*. You gain insight and say, "Okay, I'm going to put my whole life toward transforming my soul, and as much as my soul transforms, it will resonate with yours and everybody's soul. And when I become fully transformed as a buddha, I even will be able to intervene directly in the confusions of others, and help them become more aware." You can proclaim that, and walk into the street, and people will knock each other out to be the first to give you lunch. They wouldn't feel you had conned them, or you weren't pulling your weight, or you weren't justifying your existence. They would feel honored to support you. You have become a true child of the universe, and doing the universe's most essential work, the work of freedom and bliss, the work of discovering of the universe itself, discovering its own reality.

Time and again, the enlightened eleventh-to twelfth-century yogin Milarepa demonstrated the ecstasy of the full-blown transcendent attitude by living stark naked in Himalayan caves throughout the harsh winters. In his youth, he had killed thirty-five people during a family feud, and he repented when he realized the evolutionary consequences of such a deed. He allowed himself to feel the terror of the prospects of the hellish effects of killing, and he used his transcendent mindset for a relentless effort toward real freedom. He would meet people who would think him mad and would compare their

mundane states of comfort and security with his superhumanly ascetical lifestyle, but he would turn his poetic gifts to the vivid rendering of the supreme comforts he enjoyed. The worldly person may sleep in a downy bed, carelessly unconscious of the effects of his evolutionary actions, unaware of the horrors awaiting him at the end of his life. But Milarepa saw the downy embrace as an evolutionary trap and felt the touch of his pillow of stone as even softer, as it kept him alert and awake so that he could investigate and purge his deepest instincts of delusion, hatred, and lust. The stone cushioned him against the dreadful spikes of hell that wait in the future of the passion-driven human, and Mila's warmth came from his inner heat of wisdom, the fire of transcendent insight.

Now we have completed the first four themes on the actual path of transformation toward enlightenment in the jewel refuge tree. Each time we work one of these themes, we gain a little corner of insight into it, we deepen the insight we already have, or we even imagine the insight we need to gain.

Let's close this chapter by reinvoking our jewel tree: As they see us working on this in our meditation, the beings in the jewel refuge tree above us, in the heavenly choir, in the heavenly host, they flip out, they become so happy. They shine, they glow, and they glee and they giggle, and they send more intense light rays down to us, and we glow more with their blessings of light rays, as well as glowing with the blessings of our inner insight. And then, our glowing shines out to the beings around us, who feel pleasure, warmth, security, and refuge in the power of that glow. And we subliminally send the little seeds, the little pattern of our own new insights about the preciousness of our human life endowed with liberty and opportunity, with the rays of our glowing, as it reflects to them. We send our realization of the immediacy of death, making each moment infinitely valuable and precious; and the inexorability of causality, making each moment extend everywhere so that we can find all fruition in this moment, and bring to bear all fruition in all future moments. And we acknowledge the vanity and the inadequacy and the suffering of all mundane states that we experience as self-centered people, so we excuse ourselves from all superficial motivation and ambition. Our transcendent attitude then resonates everywhere, and freedom rings everywhere.

And as we do that, the mentor beings in the wish-granting jewel tree, high above the jeweline branches of the tree, are so pleased, they radiate, they dissolve, the tree dissolves, the lake dissolves, the high top of the world dissolves, and it all pours and floods into us in the form of rainbow light, of white diamond, of red ruby, of blue sapphire, of yellow topaz, and of green emerald. We fill up with that light, and then we dedicate the merit of that meditation to all of the beings around us, infinite numbers of beings in the vast infinite field around us; and then we dissolve into light, and we become one with them. And we and the refuge field become one with all the mother beings around us. We experience this dissolving as a flood of bliss, and we rest in that union.

And then, somebody thinks, “Hey, where did everybody go?” And we come back to our conventional site on planet Earth and go out into the world.