

KHENPO'S
TALKS

MASSEY UNIVERSITY

WHAT FAITH MEANS IN BUDDHISM



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SODARGYE

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Khenpo Sodargye

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Ordained monastics and discerning laypeople are to analyze the Buddha's teachings with the same meticulous care goldsmiths use to purify gold—accepting them only when they withstand scrutiny. If you accept them solely out of respect, it becomes blind faith.



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HEATHER BUTTLE

Welcome to this extraordinary public lecture by Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche. Welcome to all students, faculty, members of the press, and members of the general public. My name is Heather Buttle. I am a senior lecturer in the School of Psychology at Massey University, and it is both my pleasure and my honor to host and introduce Khenpo to you this evening.

The format for today's lecture is as follows: Khenpo will speak for approximately an hour and a half, followed by a thirty-minute question-and-answer session. He will deliver his talk in Mandarin, and we are fortunate to have an English interpreter present. At this time, I would like to extend to Khenpo a very warm New Zealand welcome: Tēnā koutou. Thank you so much for joining us today. Khenpo has traveled a great distance from China to be here, and we are truly honored by his presence.

Today, Khenpo joins us at Massey University to speak on the topic of *What Faith Means in Buddhism*. This is a subject that I personally selected, with the hope that it would inspire both academic and spiritual curiosity among those unfamiliar with

Buddhism, while also offering meaningful insight to those who already have some familiarity with the tradition.

When we consider the world's religions, most are, in fact, theistic: they posit a god or gods who can intervene in human affairs. For example, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, there is a God in whom believers may place their faith, to whom they may pray for compassion and mercy, and whom they trust to have an overarching plan for their lives. Buddhism, by contrast, is non-theistic. It does not embrace the concept of a first cause or creator deity, as found in Judeo-Christian religions. Yet, intriguingly, faith remains a central element within Buddhism. This presents us with a compelling question: What does faith mean in a non-theistic tradition such as Buddhism?

To explore this question, we turn to Khenpo, whose insight and experience will, I hope, help us gain a deeper understanding. Thank you very much, Khenpo.

KHENPO SODARGYE RINPOCHE

I am Tibetan, and it would be most natural for me to speak with you in Tibetan. However, due to the translation arrangements today, I will be communicating with you in Mandarin. I hope you will kindly understand.

It is truly an honor to have this opportunity to speak with you at this university. My schedule on this trip has been quite full, and my time is limited. I have just come from a region at an altitude of 4,000 meters, traveling first to Chengdu, then on to Shanghai, from Shanghai to Guangzhou, and finally from Guangzhou to New Zealand. I understand that here, we are only a few dozen meters above sea level. Coming from such a high altitude down to the coast, I must admit I feel a bit lightheaded. So I am not entirely sure whether I will be able to express my thoughts as clearly as I would like today. Nevertheless, it is a rare and meaningful occasion for all of us to gather here. Such a gathering is, in itself, the result of a special convergence of causes and conditions.

Taking advantage of this opportunity, I would like to explore with you the meaning of faith in Buddhism—what Buddhist

faith truly is. Faith, after all, is not an unfamiliar concept to any of us. In general terms, faith refers to a deep trust or acceptance of something or someone. This is the basic understanding of faith.

UNDERSTANDING FAITH

1 What Kind of Faith Do You Hold?

Faith can be understood in many ways, and here we might consider five distinct forms: intellectual faith, idolatrous faith, emotional faith, authoritarian faith, and wisdom-based faith.

Intellectual faith is found in those who are deeply committed to a particular philosophy, doctrine, or ideology. Such individuals devote themselves wholeheartedly to embracing and internalizing these beliefs.

Idolatrous faith refers to the elevation of a particular person—such as a celebrity or religious figure—to the highest status, regarding them as the ultimate object of admiration or aspiration.

Emotional faith arises from profound emotional bonds between people. Regardless of the other person's actions, one continues

to see them in a positive light. What is commonly referred to as love or deep affection is, in fact, a form of emotional faith—an interdependence rooted in feeling.

Authoritarian faith is characterized by a strong attraction to power, status, or certain systems, including political ideologies. When someone is especially drawn to authority or prestige, this is known as authoritarian faith.

Most important, however, is wisdom-based faith. This form of faith is rooted in an inner, contemplative orientation—a spiritual longing for direct realization or inner experience. It is found in those who seek such realization through the world's various spiritual traditions, aspiring to a deeper, experiential understanding.

If we look at the present day, especially in the twenty-first century, it seems that most people are primarily drawn to external forms of faith—whether it is admiration for a particular person or the pursuit of wealth, sometimes called the worship of money. In such a time of heightened materialism, relatively few turn inward in search of genuine happiness.

And yet, happiness does seem to find its way to the surface. Since arriving in New Zealand, I have noticed many smiles on

people's faces and have heard much laughter. Perhaps this place holds a quiet reminder that contentment need not be sought so far away.

2 Where You Place Your Faith Matters

In any context, especially when discussing faith, it is crucial to recognize that misunderstanding the true object of faith can have serious consequences. When faith is misplaced, we may confuse poison for medicine, or medicine for poison. That which is genuinely beneficial may be dismissed as harmful, while what is truly harmful may be embraced as good. For this reason, wisdom and discernment are essential in our approach to faith.

This principle applies equally to people and to religious traditions. Someone who appears trustworthy may, over time, reveal themselves to be otherwise. Similarly, we may mistake a harmful teaching for a beneficial one, or dismiss a genuinely valuable tradition as something negative. In either case, the consequences can be serious.

When our faith is well-placed, it brings happiness to ourselves, to those around us, and even, from a Buddhist perspective, to our future lives. But if our faith is misplaced, it can bring

suffering and confusion not only to ourselves, but also to others and to society as a whole.

All of you here are people of wisdom. When we look at the world, we can see that some have found the right object of faith, and this brings great meaning both to their own lives and to society. Others, however, have gone astray, and the results can be unfortunate.



FAITH IN BUDDHISM

1 Faith Is the Root of All Virtue

Once you have found that which is worthy of commitment, nurturing inner faith becomes essential. In what follows, we shall explore the meaning of faith in Buddhism.

In Buddhism, faith is regarded as the foundation of all virtue and merit. The *Avatamsaka Sutra*—a scripture that is available in English translation—states:

*Faith is the source of the path and the mother of all virtue.
It nourishes every kind of virtue,
Severs the net of doubt, and frees one from the current of
attachment.*

Faith is the very origin of the Buddhist path, giving rise to all merit, much like a mother gives birth to her children. It nurtures every kind of virtue, just as sunlight and rain sustain all living things. Faith also has the power to dispel the web of doubt and to free us from the grip of craving and attachment. For these reasons, faith holds a place of profound importance in the Buddhist tradition.

The great master Shantideva—an extraordinary scholar from Nalanda, one of the world's greatest ancient universities—writes in his *The Way of the Bodhisattva*,

*The Buddha said that faith
Is the root of every kind of virtue.*

As the Buddha proclaimed in various scriptures, faith is indeed the foundation of all virtue. Without faith, no Buddhist practice can succeed, and not even the smallest merit can arise.

The *Sutra of the Ten Dharmas* also teaches:

*Those devoid of faith cannot give rise to virtue,
Just as a fire-scorched seed can never sprout green.*

This means that without faith, virtuous merit becomes impossible, much as a charred seed cannot awaken to life.

Faith is indispensable not only for Buddhist practice but also for worldly life. Whether it is trust in oneself or in others, it is foundational—for without it, nothing is achieved. In family life, for instance, losing trust in loved ones breeds suspicion, erecting barriers that erode happiness.

Thus, cultivating faith through intentional practice remains of profound importance.

2 Three Levels of Faith in Buddhism

In Buddhism, faith is understood to unfold across three progressive levels.

The first is what we call vivid faith, characteristic of the beginner's mind. Like a child entering a garden and delighting in the beauty of every flower without being able to explain why, this faith arises from an intuitive sense of joy and goodness. It is a spontaneous and heartfelt response, an immediate affinity for the dharma or a spiritual tradition, even before any intellectual understanding has developed.

This kind of faith is common among many religious practitioners today—whether Buddhist, Christian, or otherwise. People may feel a deep trust in their chosen path, yet when asked why they believe in God or the Buddha, they often cannot articulate a clear reason. They simply feel drawn to their faith. Such faith, however, is rooted in emotion. It lacks a stable foundation and can easily waver or change.

The second level is termed eager faith. This represents a more developed stage. At this level, one understands the qualities

and benefits of what one believes in, as well as the drawbacks of not cultivating it. Through study, one develops reasoned conviction. In the Buddhist context, this means understanding the benefits of taking refuge and generating bodhicitta, as well as the consequences of neglecting these practices. Through such comprehension, one develops trust based on understanding.

This second-stage faith relies primarily on theoretical study and intellectual acceptance, making it inherently more stable than vivid faith.

The third level is irreversible faith, attained through repeated study, discussion, and careful observation. Through this process, one becomes completely certain that the object of one's faith is correct, without any doubt. One personally witnesses its reality—its genuine truth—no longer needing to rely on theories or external validation, having truly experienced it firsthand.

In Buddhism, irreversible faith is the highest form of faith: rational, wisdom-infused, and unshakable.

3 From Theory to Direct Experience

Actually, regarding the progression of faith, I have had a similar experience concerning this very country, New Zealand.

Over thirty years ago, when I was in junior high school, my geography teacher spoke to us about Oceania—specifically Australia and New Zealand. He described a wealthy nation in the middle of the sea, known for its animal husbandry, like a paradise.

At that time, I was not yet twenty and was living in a small mountain valley. I had never traveled; I had not even seen the great lakes of the Tibetan regions, such as Qinghai Lake, nor had I seen the Yangtze or Yellow Rivers. When I encountered these descriptions, I argued with my teacher. I asked, “How is that possible? How can there be a country in the middle of the vast ocean with herds of cattle grazing on it?” It seemed impossible to me, so I did not believe it at all. I doubted much of what my teacher said.

Gradually, however, as I grew older and my knowledge expanded, I came to understand theoretically that such a country existed. Yet, mentally, there was still some resistance. On the map, amidst the vastness of the ocean, this place appeared as a mere dot. It was difficult to accept as real. But upon arriving here yesterday and personally witnessing these landscapes, I felt the truth of it directly.

In the same way, within the context of religion, we often regard certain teachings as mere legends. We read about the pure lands or other marvelous events described in the scriptures. Yet, when we reach a certain state of realization, these things can actually manifest in our experience. At that moment, we realize that the words of the masters were entirely reliable.

This leads me to a reflection I often return to: whether in Buddhism or other spiritual traditions, there is profound knowledge. Until one has studied and explored this depth over a long period, one must not lightly dismiss it—and certainly should not disparage it out of arrogance. To do so risks committing a grave error—one that may remain beyond repair for the rest of one's life.

4 The Union of Faith and Wisdom in Buddhist Practice

In Buddhism, there is a teaching: “Rely on the dharma, not on individuals.” This is because some of those we admire may not possess genuine realization or true wisdom. If we blindly worship such people, we risk being led astray. When one becomes infatuated with a person, or engages in uncritical idolization, even their mistakes may seem reasonable or justified.

Perhaps some of you have heard about an incident in mainland China. A celebrity was arrested for drug use. During his detention, he wore a prison uniform, which was later listed for sale on e-commerce platforms. Many of his fans thought the uniform looked stylish and rushed to buy it. These uniforms were priced from 28 to 9,999 RMB, and they sold out rapidly. Many people wanted to experience wearing what he wore. This episode illustrates how easily people can be swept up by irrational enthusiasm, and how much we need wisdom.

For this reason, Buddhism strongly opposes blind faith. As the Buddha approached parinirvana, he taught an important scripture, the *Mahaparinirovana Sutra*. In it, the Buddha said:

Faith without understanding increases ignorance;

Understanding without faith increases wrong views.

This means that if we have faith without wisdom, ignorance will grow, and our actions may not be virtuous. Conversely, if we have only intellectual understanding without faith, we may fall into wrong views. This is sometimes seen in academia today, where people are quick to criticize others but do not apply wisdom to themselves. Therefore, faith and wisdom must be cultivated together.

Professor Heather Buttle mentioned that Buddhism involves faith, as do Christianity and other traditions that place faith in God. Yet there are important differences between them, particularly in how faith is understood and expressed.

Einstein offered a useful distinction in this regard. He observed that many people believe in a God who rewards and punishes—what he called “the God of Providence.” However, he suggested that “the man who is thoroughly convinced of the universal operation of the law of causation cannot for a moment entertain the idea of a being who interferes in the course of events—provided, of course, that he takes the hypothesis of causality really seriously.”

Strictly speaking, Buddhism is neither fully theistic nor entirely atheistic. It possesses its own unique interpretive framework. Fundamentally, however, the Buddha is recognized as the discoverer of truth, not its creator, nor the architect of all things. From this perspective, the Buddhist view of causality is often seen as compatible with scientific observation and logical scrutiny.

In this respect, Buddhism differs from many other religious traditions. In some traditions, when we attempt to investigate, debate, or explore the teachings, we may be told that the divine

realm is ultimately beyond the reach of ordinary people—that such states are inaccessible to us. In Buddhism, however, practitioners are encouraged to examine even the teachings of the Buddha himself. If our analysis finds them reasonable, we are invited to accept them; if not, we are free to set them aside. The Buddha stated this clearly in the sutras. In the Tibetan scripture, the verse reads:

*Monks and wise scholars,
Just as gold is tested by cutting, burning, and polishing,
Examine my words carefully
And do not accept them simply out of reverence.*

This means that ordained monastics and discerning laypeople are to analyze the Buddha's teachings with the same meticulous care goldsmiths use to purify gold—accepting them only when they withstand scrutiny. If you accept them solely out of respect, it becomes blind faith. Therefore, you must rely on wisdom. If you find the teachings rational, accept them wholeheartedly; if not, even as a Buddhist, you should not accept them. This is the impartial spirit in which the Buddha taught his followers.

As we have explored, Buddhist faith unfolds across three ascending levels, with the deeper layer rooted more firmly in wisdom. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* says: "In the dharma, wisdom

reigns supreme”—a truth that underscores the primacy of discernment in the Buddhist path. Without wisdom, no endeavor can be truly sound.

Is there a contradiction in affirming the importance of faith while asserting that wisdom is paramount? Not at all. In the Buddhist path, faith serves as the threshold for entry, while wisdom becomes the guiding light for deeper practice. As the great Bodhisattva Nagarjuna taught in the *Treatise on the Great Wisdom*: “The ocean of dharma is entered by faith and crossed by wisdom.” Like the boundless sea, the dharma holds immense depth and virtue. Only by embarking on the vessel of faith and grasping the oars of wisdom can one navigate its depths successfully.



HOW TO GENERATE FAITH?

The question thus emerges: how does one cultivate such faith? The answer lies in the sustained practice of listening, contemplating, and meditating on the dharma—the threefold path essential to Buddhist training. Without systematic engagement, the teachings remain opaque, and genuine faith cannot take root.

In Tibetan Buddhism, particular emphasis is placed on debate—a practice that both sharpens wisdom and deepens faith with remarkable effectiveness. Through debate, we can gradually dispel the doubts that linger within us. Through debate, we can challenge and overcome the various mistaken views that arise in our minds. Through debate, we can give rise to a pure and untainted faith. Through debate, we can also develop the wisdom that recognizes the true nature of reality.

It is important that we do not enter a spiritual path blindly, wander through it in confusion, and emerge unchanged. To do so is to squander the precious opportunity of this human life. I often advise Buddhists: if you have taken refuge, commit to systematic study of the Buddha's teachings. Otherwise, you risk becoming a "superficial Buddhist," adrift in ritual without

understanding. This advice applies to all spiritual seekers: whatever tradition you choose to follow, ensure that your faith is grounded in a clear and thorough understanding of its core teachings.

Faith Is the Key to Spiritual Realization

As previously shared, faith acts as the gateway to the dharma. Yet when refined into rational faith—a conviction rooted in wisdom and discernment—its transformative power deepens exponentially. Such faith, once established, becomes a luminous force that unveils the mind’s true nature, guiding one toward the realization of enlightenment.

In the *Uttaratantra Shastra*, Bodhisattva Maitreya teaches:

This ultimate truth of the spontaneously-born is to be understood through faith alone.

This means that the mind’s nature—pure, luminous, and ever-present—can fully be awakened only by relying on unwavering, undefiled faith as the compass for spiritual inquiry. When this faith becomes truly powerful, it can reveal the buddha nature within, allowing us to directly experience the mind’s essence.

Many envision Bodhisattva Maitreya as the rotund, ever-smiling figure familiar in Chinese Buddhist iconography. In truth, this imagery is a historical adaptation: the pot-bellied figure we know emerged from the legend of a Chan monk named Budai, who lived during the Five Dynasties period, whose story evolved into an artistic symbol over time.

Such historical reinterpretation is not uncommon. Consider the Tang Dynasty monk Xuanzang's arduous journey to India in search of Buddhist scriptures, which inspired the mythical *Journey to the West*—a tale of a monkey, a pig, and other companions accompanying a monk on a westward quest. While creative adaptation enriches culture, we must distinguish historical fact from mythology. Over time, real events can become embellished, giving rise to legends and stories that, while entertaining, may obscure the original meaning.

That said, the jovial Budai figure could indeed be seen as a manifestation of Maitreya, for buddhas and bodhisattvas are believed to assume infinite forms to guide sentient beings. This possibility reflects the vastness of spiritual symbolism.

Ultimately, it is through the power of faith that we can directly realize the mind's true nature. This realization is of utmost importance for every practitioner. When we truly recognize

the mind's essence—its emptiness, luminosity, and timelessness—all worldly afflictions, pain, anxiety, and sorrow naturally fall away. It is my sincere hope that each of us may come to know this innate nature within ourselves.

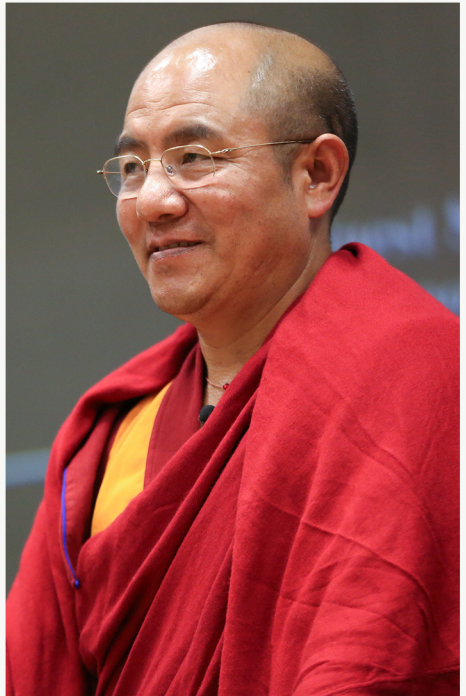
Throughout history, those who have realized the mind's true nature are countless, spanning different eras and traditions. In India, great masters such as Tilopa, Naropa, Vimalamitra, and Jnanasutra illuminated the path. Tibetan Buddhism has produced its own distinguished lineage of masters, including Omniscient Longchenpa, Sakya Pandita, Je Tsongkhapa, Milarepa, Taranatha, and many others. In Han Chinese Buddhism, figures such as Great Master Zhiyi, the Sixth Patriarch Huineng, and Master Huiyuan stand as enduring beacons of awakening.

If we study the biographies of these great masters—whether from India, Tibetan regions, or Han regions—we discover that there is a profound and lasting happiness in this world: the joy of ultimate liberation and inner peace. Their lives remind us that the highest freedom is not found in external circumstances, but in the direct realization of our own mind's true nature.

While I am not personally acquainted with any enlightened individuals in New Zealand, I trust that our discussion today

will plant seeds of auspicious conditions that may one day ripen into realization for those present.

It is said that, due to its unique geographical location, Massey University is among the first universities in the world to greet the morning sun, earning it the reputation of “the university that embraces the sun.” May these humble reflections today, together with the brilliant sunshine here, bring warmth and happiness to all living beings throughout the world.



QUESTION AND ANSWER

QUESTION 1 Thank you, Venerable Master, for your inspiring talk today. I am a Buddhist practitioner from mainland China, and I have been studying and practicing the dharma for over twenty years. Listening to your words today has brought me great clarity and a sense of illumination.

I would like to ask specifically about the wisdom of meditation. Since we progress from the wisdom of listening to the wisdom of contemplation, and finally to the wisdom of meditation, I am particularly interested in how to further develop this third wisdom. Could you please offer some guidance on its cultivation? Thank you.

KHENPO SODARGYE In Buddhist practice, the wisdom of listening is developed by listening attentively to the teachings of one's teacher. The wisdom of contemplation is cultivated by repeatedly reflecting on and analyzing these teachings, as well as the scriptures and tantras one has studied—through thorough investigation and critical inquiry. The wisdom of meditation, in turn, is realized by integrating and internalizing

the insights gained from listening and contemplation through sustained meditative practice.

Each Buddhist lineage and tradition offers its own methods for cultivating the wisdom of meditation. However, all traditions emphasize beginning with the completion of the five hundred thousand preliminary practices (ngöndro). After receiving the necessary empowerments, practitioners proceed to the generation- and completion-stage practices of Vajrayana. Thus, the specific approach to cultivating meditative wisdom should be chosen in accordance with one's own tradition and the instructions received.

QUESTION 2 Thank you, Rinpoche. I would like to ask a question.

I have been studying Buddhism for about two years. At home, I recite sutras, chant the Buddha's name, and sometimes meditate. I consider these practices my "homework"—the daily spiritual exercises I commit to as part of my routine.

However, since I am practicing as a layperson, I inevitably have to deal with the realities of everyday life. There are

always practical matters that require my attention and response.

For example, sometimes I do not handle things as skillfully as I would like. Lacking wisdom, I occasionally lose my temper. When I reflect on this, I see this as a significant shortcoming—one I sincerely wish to overcome.

My question is: How can I better integrate Buddhist practice into my daily life so that I may become more peaceful? How can I use my practice to cultivate greater wisdom? Thank you.

KHENPO SODARGYE This is a common situation among many Buddhist practitioners. As I mentioned earlier, if Buddhists make an effort to study the dharma from multiple perspectives, while also learning the basic ethical principles of being a good person, then the ordinary challenges of daily life become much easier to handle.

Especially when one genuinely cultivates the bodhicitta that Buddhism emphasizes, the power of this altruistic intention makes it much easier to avoid anger with friends, to foster harmony within one's family, and to maintain peaceful relationships with those around us.

Indeed, many people here today can attest that, through the study of Mahayana teachings, their relationships have been transformed and their own attitudes have shifted.

Of course, the essential condition for this transformation is systematic, step-by-step study. Without such study, relying instead on blind faith, even diligent practices such as chanting sutras, making prostrations, or burning incense may not bring about real change.

Ultimately, what is needed is wisdom—a wisdom that must be cultivated through sustained effort over time.

QUESTION 3 Rinpoche, thank you for your excellent talk.

I have heard that realizing the nature of mind requires extensive study of Madhyamaka philosophy. However, I have also heard that true recognition of the mind's nature can be remarkably simple—requiring only unwavering faith in one's guru. There are many stories, for example, of close attendants to great masters who, without studying philosophical doctrines, attained sudden realization after years of devoted service to their teachers.

Could you please clarify how these two approaches—to realization through study and to realization through devotion—can be reconciled on the path to enlightenment?

Thank you very much.

KHENPO SODARGYE Each individual possesses a unique spiritual disposition, which gives rise to a variety of paths toward enlightenment.

In the sutra traditions, the faculty of wisdom—one of the five spiritual faculties—holds particular importance. Practitioners gradually cultivate wisdom and faith through prolonged contemplation and systematic study of Madhyamaka and Chittamatra. Only then does awakening occur.

Vajrayana Buddhism, by contrast, places profound emphasis on the faculty of faith. Iconic figures like Jetsun Milarepa and many others in Tibetan Buddhism exemplify enlightenment arising from a disciple's sincere devotion to the guru. Yet this path requires an extraordinarily intense connection, wherein the guru ripens the disciple's mindstream through empowerments and tantric pith instructions. Each stage must reach completion. Otherwise, enlightenment through a single phrase remains extremely difficult for ordinary practitioners.

However, for exceptional individuals whose wisdom faculty is on the verge of ripening, awakening through faith is indeed possible. Throughout history, there have been numerous cases of enlightenment born of faith among those with ripened faculties. For most, however, the gradual path of sequential learning—anchored in philosophical frameworks like Madhyamaka—offers a safer approach. Both approaches reflect the Buddha’s skillful means, adapting to diverse capacities on the journey toward liberation.

QUESTION 4 Amitabha Buddha. Greetings, Venerable Teacher.

I am originally from Liaoning Province in Northeast China. Although I have been a Buddhist for eight or nine years, I have lived in New Zealand only for the past five. Before that, I was closely involved for three or four years with the temple where I took refuge. During that time, I regularly participated in rituals and ceremonies: I recited sutras, chanted praises, and took part in water-and-land dharma assemblies, among other activities.

However, only now have I begun to realize how little I truly understand about Buddhism. As you described, I have spent these years in a kind of spiritual haze, without

a genuine grasp of the teachings. Now I sincerely want to study Buddhist doctrine in earnest, yet I feel almost completely ignorant of the basics.

So I would like to ask a very important question: How should I begin? How can I find a qualified teacher or spiritual guide to lead me? I feel a deep need for that guidance. Thank you.

KHENPO SODARGYE As Buddhists—and, in fact, as followers of any spiritual tradition—we should not drift through life without direction. To be born human is extraordinarily rare, and to encounter the authentic teachings of the Buddha is rarer still. For anyone who truly aspires to study the dharma, the guidance of a qualified teacher is indispensable.

If it is difficult to connect with a teacher where you live, do not be discouraged. Modern technology has made the dharma accessible in ways unimaginable in the past. Whether your interest lies in Tibetan Buddhism, Han Chinese Buddhism, or Theravada Buddhism, there is now a wealth of online courses and resources available to sincere students around the world. Many universities and Buddhist institutions offer distance-learning programs, so authentic teachings can reach you wherever you are.

As for study materials, I recommend beginning with texts such as *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*. In addition, many sutras and commentaries from different Buddhist traditions can serve as reliable guides.

Ultimately, diligent study is the foundation of genuine practice. Only by engaging sincerely and wholeheartedly with the teachings will you learn how to apply them in your own life—and how to progress on the path.

QUESTION 5 Venerable Khenpo, thank you for your teaching.

I am a graduate of Massey University, and it is an honor to return to my alma mater today for your lecture. It has been nearly ten years since I graduated, and this is my first time back on campus. I am delighted to see so many students here today; I believe they are truly fortunate to have the opportunity to attend your talk in person. When I was a student here a decade ago, I would not have imagined such an opportunity.

On behalf of these students, I would like to ask a question. For those who, after hearing your lecture, find themselves

interested in Buddhism, should they begin their exploration with the study of Mahayana teachings, or with Vajrayana teachings?

Additionally, could you please explain the fundamental differences and similarities between Mahayana and Vajrayana?

Thank you.

KHENPO SODARGYE Whether you are a student or a teacher, you may enter through either the sutra path or the tantric path. In Tibetan Buddhism, both are always studied together—you will not find a single school within any of the major Tibetan lineages that practices sutra alone or tantra alone. Tibetan Buddhism is, without exception, a union of sutra and tantra. Han Chinese Buddhism also has its sutra traditions. As for which path to begin with, this is ultimately a personal decision, and you are encouraged to explore and discern for yourself.

Regarding the difference between Mahayana and Tantrayana: there is a tantric scripture called the *Heruka Galpo Tantra*, which states:

*In the Causal Vehicle of Attributes,
Sentient beings are regarded as the cause for attaining buddhahood.*

*In the Resultant Vehicle of Secret Mantra,
The very nature of the mind being cultivated is itself seen as
buddha.*

In other words, the sutra teachings view sentient beings as possessing the potential to become buddhas, while tantra views sentient beings as already buddha. Of course, this distinction must be understood in terms of appearance and reality. But this is essentially what the tantra says about the difference between Sutrayana and Tantrayana.

QUESTION 6 Venerable Khenpo, thank you for your teaching. I am currently visiting from Beijing, and my family is considering immigrating to New Zealand. It feels truly auspicious to have the opportunity to attend your lecture here today.

In Beijing, I have been participating in a study group following the Larung Gar lineage, where a small group of us has been studying and practicing together for nearly a year. We are now working through the preliminary practices of Dzogchen, following your teachings on this subject.

I have a few questions I would like to ask:

First, is it absolutely necessary to complete the preliminary practices in order to progress in Buddhist practice, or are there simpler, more accessible entry points for lay practitioners?

Second, I have been practicing yoga every morning for some time. Is there any conflict between yoga and Buddhist meditation?

Thank you.

KHENPO SODARGYE In Buddhist practice, the path is often compared to climbing a mountain: there are many routes to the peak. While the preliminary practices are highly valued in our tradition, and at Larung Gar we place particular emphasis on them, they are not the only profound way to enter. Different schools and lineages offer a variety of methods, each with its own unique strengths.

The text *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* has been translated into many languages and is studied around the world, which speaks to its importance. In our tradition, however, there is truly no simpler or more direct starting point than the preliminaries.

Ngöndro is not complicated in itself; it asks for sincerity, consistency, and perseverance. If you choose to undertake these practices, it is important to see them through to completion.

As for yoga—in Tibetan Buddhism, we actually use the word “yoga” quite a lot! I once spent some time really diving into yoga and its underlying principles. There are many different yoga lineages out there, and yes, some yogic principles do share common ground with Buddhist practice. But there are also important differences—some subtle, some quite fundamental.

If you find that your yoga and dharma practices are in conflict—perhaps because of time constraints or differing priorities—it may be helpful to focus on whichever practice feels most meaningful to you at this moment and set the other aside temporarily. Through ongoing reflection, you will naturally come to understand your true priorities.

That said, I do not believe that yoga and Buddhist meditation are inherently incompatible. Yoga can be a valuable way to harmonize body and mind, and its popularity attests to its benefits for many people.

Buddhism, by its very nature, is inclusive and tolerant. It does not require exclusive adherence, nor does it prohibit the study

or practice of other disciplines, as long as they do not cause harm to oneself or others.

In short, you are encouraged to explore and learn from any tradition or practice that supports your well-being and benefits others. Restricting yourself to a single approach, without good reason, can be unnecessarily limiting.

QUESTION 7 Thank you, Khenpo Rinpoche. I have a question regarding the Buddha's teachings. It is said that the Buddha gave 84,000 different teachings. However, I have noticed that some of these teachings seem to contradict one another, or even appear to point in opposite directions.

When I search for teachings online, I often find myself overwhelmed by the sheer variety and complexity, unsure of which path to follow. It feels much like being in a shopping mall, faced with countless options and not knowing which is truly right for me.

Furthermore, I find it difficult to trust my own judgment, since, as ordinary human beings, we are all subject to the limitations of the five aggregates. Could you please offer some guidance on how we, as ordinary people, can

discern which teachings are most appropriate for our individual needs and circumstances? Thank you.

KHENPO SODARGYE The 84,000 teachings of the Buddha truly encompass a vast and profound body of wisdom. If we try to navigate this immense collection on our own, it can feel overwhelming—much like standing before the extensive Buddhist collections in major libraries in the United States, where even the Tibetan Buddhist texts alone fill entire shelves.

In Tibetan Buddhism, however, there is a guiding principle: we rely on the guidance of a qualified guru.

There is a well-known story about the great master Atisha, who, upon arriving in the Land of Tibet, was asked by three of his disciples—Khuton Tsonдру Yungdrung, Ngok Lekpe Sherab, and Dromton Gyalwe Jungne—a crucial question: “For a practitioner seeking liberation or enlightenment, what is most important: the vast array of sutras, treatises, and teachings, or the pith instructions of a guru?” Atisha replied without hesitation, “The guru’s pith instructions are most important.” When asked to elaborate, he explained that even someone who can read, recite, and teach the entire Tripitaka may find the dharma remains abstract and disconnected from their life if

they lack the practical guidance of a guru who has personally traversed the path.

The wisdom of an experienced teacher is invaluable, as they can discern which teachings are most essential for a student's unique circumstances and guide them accordingly. For this reason, Tibetan Buddhism places great emphasis on relying on the insight and experience of a qualified guru when navigating the vast landscape of the dharma.

While I do not claim to be a guru, my decades of study and research in Buddhism allow me to offer some suggestions. For those unsure where to begin, I often recommend texts such as *The Way of the Bodhisattva* and *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*.

For practitioners who feel lost among the many teachings, these works serve as profound gateways. If you study them systematically, you will gain a clear understanding of the essence of the 84,000 teachings and find reliable guidance for your own path.

QUESTION 8 Venerable Khenpo, I have two questions.

First, each of us must face the realities of birth, aging, sickness, and death. While birth is often a time of joy, many people experience great fear when confronted with death.

From a Buddhist perspective, how should we understand and approach the reality of death?

Second, in our daily lives, we all must address the basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter. For many, eating meat is an essential part of life. Yet Mahayana Buddhism encourages vegetarianism. From the Buddhist point of view, what is the significance of adopting a vegetarian diet?

KHENPO SODARGYE Thank you for your questions. First, regarding birth, I would gently point out that it is not quite accurate to say there is joy at birth. In fact, no child is born smiling—every newborn enters the world crying, not laughing. If you watch any film or television show depicting childbirth, the very first sound is always a cry. So I would not say that birth is a joyful event for the one being born.

As for how Buddhism views death: according to Buddhist teachings, death is not an end, but a transition. For those who sincerely practice the dharma, death is not something to fear. Buddhism teaches that life does not end with death—there is a future, and even greater possibilities ahead. Through studying the dharma and practicing virtue, one can face death with confidence, aspiring to be reborn in a pure land such as Sukhavati,

or to continue on the path of spiritual development. In this way, Buddhism offers a meaningful perspective on death, helping us to overcome fear and see death as part of a larger journey.

Your second question concerns vegetarianism. In Mahayana Buddhism, following a vegetarian diet is highly encouraged. While there are different interpretations and practices, the core teachings emphasize compassion for all sentient beings. No Mahayana scriptures support the act of killing or eating the flesh of sentient beings. Choosing a vegetarian lifestyle is not only a spiritual practice; it is also a way to cultivate kindness, promote harmony in society, and care for our environment.

Today, we face serious environmental challenges such as global warming and rising sea levels. More than 2,500 years ago, the Buddha taught the importance of protecting animals and caring for the environment. Practicing vegetarianism is one of the most direct ways to support both personal health and the health of the planet.

Yet vegetarianism is not a Buddhist practice exclusive to Buddhism. From the perspective of modern health and medicine, a vegetarian diet is widely recognized as beneficial for health and longevity. Its value, then, extends well beyond any single tradition and is increasingly embraced around the world.

Dedication

May the merit resulting from this piece of work contribute
in the greatest possible measure to the long life of all great
masters, to the flourishing of the Buddhadharma,
and to the welfare of all sentient beings.

It is always our wish to present a work of the highest quality to the readers so that anyone who reads this text would find inspiration. So we would very much appreciate your comments, feedback or suggestions for how this text might be improved and made more valuable. You are also greatly welcomed if you want to make a contribution to any of our other projects of translation. Please email us at: *translation@khenposodargye.org*



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