

# *Radiating Kindness*

Lord Jigten Sumgon's  
Practice of Bodhicitta



With Essays by  
Khenmo Drolma



*“Absolutely all phenomena are interrelated, interconnected, interdependent.”*

H.H. Drikung Kyabgon Chetsang Rinpoche



## Preface

*She was dying, the water was too cold, and desperately she paddled, gasping, as the water seemed to boil with her struggle to stay alive. Rough hands tried to catch her, but she kept going until finally a hook caught her hair and dragged her into the boat. Terrified, she collapsed.*

Our Nunnery's temple puppy, Emaho, experienced her very own miracle of kindness. She was with my sister in Maine and escaped the fenced yard. Emaho ended up at the ocean and started swimming straight out away from shore. Her previous experience of water in Vermont had only been shallow streams. Two men in a sailboat thought they saw a seal in the middle of the harbor and then realized it was a dog! She was violently shivering and about to drown. Exceptionally shy, she avoided capture despite her danger. They finally used a hook to pull her into the boat and one of the men put her inside his sweater to warm her up. They then called the Coast Guard and Animal Rescue. But when they learned she would be put into a cold room with only a concrete floor until the owner could be found, they took her home. They bought her food and treats, and their cat shared her toys. They were inventive in trying to find me by phoning, and even joining Facebook, to send out a message. Both my sister and I got their messages and my sister went and picked Emaho up, just as the puppy was eyeing the rescuers' warm bed. One tiny puppy was rescued due to kindness of strangers.

How does compassion arise in our minds and hearts? How is it we can go to great lengths to help another? To whom do we extend ourselves and

when do we stop? How have barriers in our hearts arisen and how are they dismantled wisely?

All spiritual traditions believe in the Golden Rule. We could say that the common goal of all traditions is to realize our interconnectedness and learn to live in a state of unbiased, unlimited compassion and kindness for all living beings. In Buddhism, learning kindness and compassion is considered a science, and can be accomplished through the training of the mind.

There are no limits to love. We can learn to open our hearts to everyone as if they were our most beloved child, as if they were us. This series of essays presents a training system taught in the Drikung Kagyu Buddhist lineage to expand our loving kindness. Each principle is accompanied by specific contemplations that support both the mind training and the application of each principle in daily life.\*

\*At all times we attend to personal safety as we work with our minds. One can forgive an aggressor without being in their presence.

## **Beginning To Explore Our Minds**

The word for meditation in Tibetan is *gom* and means familiarization; we wish to become familiar with our mind to uncover its true nature. The most accessible meditation exercise for most people is simply focusing on the breath and noticing what happens. It sounds very simple, but when we try it, we might perceive a torrent of thoughts that seem to control us.

Begin the meditation by simply sitting down and breathing. By breathing in and breathing out we become in touch with the basic fact of life—impermanence. There is nothing permanent and unchanging that we can hold onto in the material world. Moment by moment everything changes. Our bodies change; our loved ones change; the environment changes; we age; we grow; our new car becomes our old car. With breathing, we naturally accept that the nature of existence is change. We do not desperately hold our breath, or extend our exhalations. Neither do we hold onto expectations, nor judge our ability to breathe. Unless we are ill, we do not even question if we are breathing well, or correctly. We merely gently, and effortlessly, breathe and change from moment to moment. We sit in the present, simply breathing. We find that, in fact, we are comfortable with change, for it is the nature of our existence.

Breathing in, we experience a connection to all of life. We are connected to all beings of the past and we offer our breath to all beings of the future. We are in dependence upon the environment and ecology that sustains us, and share the atmosphere with all living beings. We are interconnected with all of life. As long as we are breathing, we are alive and can be grateful. Gratitude creates a foundation for openness. In this state of mind self-concern abates and our spirits lift. If we start our meditation sessions by contemplating all the kindness we have received from our parents, teachers, our teacher's

teachers, and so forth, we begin to realize how much we have received and it becomes easier to extend ourselves to others.

When I do this meditation, sometimes it helps me to remember the stories about Marpa who was a key figure in the Kagyu lineage. He fearlessly walked from Tibet to India three times, which is like walking from Maine to California while dodging danger from the environment and bandits. The last time he planned a trip, his students begged him not to go because he was older and they feared for him. But Marpa persevered in order to bring the Buddhist teachings to Tibet. His courage and determination are the reason we have so many wonderful meditation instructions today.

I have traveled to India six times; each time was more physically difficult than the previous trip. Many times I was overwhelmed by fear or repulsion—the trains reeked of urine, the bathrooms overflowed, and my meditation room in India was overrun by spiders and even an occasional rat. During those times I thought of my teachers who gave their entire lives to others; gratitude is too small a word to describe what I felt toward them.

We all have had people who have helped us—a family member, a neighbor, a teacher. Many of us have been blessed through the kindness of spiritual teachers who have shared their experience and wisdom with us. Then there are the “teachers” we often overlook who also have had a profound influence in our lives. For instance, in my tiny town of Lincoln, Vermont, I think of Corinne who bakes pies and takes the elderly to doctor’s appointments. Her TLC has often revived me on a hard day. When I spend a moment in appreciation and gratitude towards all the people who have helped me understand what it means to love, my heart becomes more tender and more open.

## Uncovering Altruism

An open heart is the goal of our practices. We can learn how to consciously arouse a state of mind that wishes benefit all other living beings. In Buddhism, we begin every activity with an aspirational prayer called The Four Immeasurables, as follows:

*May all Mother sentient beings, boundless as the sky, have happiness and the causes of happiness.*

*May they be liberated from suffering and the causes of suffering.*

*May they never be free of the happiness that is free from sorrow.*

*May they rest in equanimity, free from attachment and aversion.*

Some days it may seem difficult to pray this prayer sincerely, especially when we are in pain ourselves and simply wish to relieve our own angst. At other times, reciting a prayer like The Four Immeasurables, can feel rote or artificial. Yet, every effort to open our heart is significant. Over time, with constant repetition, The Four Immeasurables can become a sincere aspiration.

I noticed that when I was a beginning Buddhist and an artist, my work was shaped from the force of such aspirations; just as over time the dripping of water shapes a rock. I moved naturally from holding gallery exhibitions, to working with art with cancer and hospice patients, because my motivation for creating art had changed from a career, to bringing to others a moment free from suffering.

## Loving Kindness Meditation

The Drikung Kagyu lineage, founded by Jigten Sumgön (1143–1217), offers a balanced and structured training that helps us unclench our hearts. One of the meditation trainings treasured in the Drikung tradition is Lord Jigten Sumgön’s instructions for developing loving kindness. Deceptively simple, these pithy instructions can be the most profound teaching in one’s life.

*Train in the feeling of loving kindness and then  
let it overflow boundlessly into the ten directions.  
Whenever you encounter any being you cannot  
love completely and sincerely, begin again.*

from *Commentary on the Bodhicitta Training*  
by H.H. Drikung Kabgyon Chetsang Rinpoche

Initially, it may be difficult to discover what loving kindness feels like. The training instructs us to visualize someone for whom we feel loving kindness, or from whom we have received loving kindness. As we do so, we may soon discover we have so many boundaries surrounding our heart that it is difficult for us to evoke feelings of loving kindness. In this instance, it may help to not visualize someone you are very close to, such as your partner, as the complexities of our relationships can hinder the clarity of the feeling. Instead, we are invited to bring to mind someone who evokes in us feelings of delight and joy such as our spiritual teacher, or a laughing baby. As we remember an experience of a baby or puppy walking toward us, we are often able to connect with a spontaneous open feeling of unconditional love.

For some, accessing any feeling to start the meditation with can be a painful search. However, we may be able to bring up a memory of an instance when we have been the recipient of someone's good will. Or, thinking about something like the warmth of the sun, can be a beginning. For many, nature can generate wonderful feelings of openness and joy that we can use as a reminder of loving kindness.

The opening of our heart in these moments often seems physical, unconditioned, and spacious. Free of judgment, we smile and experience warmth flowing through us and our bodies relax. This openness can seem frightening, however. And when we try to extend it to another, we may suddenly shut down the flow of warmth as if we were slamming a door shut. This can seem shocking to us and, thus, a profound journey begins.

In Lord Jigten Sumgön's training instructions, for two weeks in our meditation sessions we are to daily use as our object of concentration the feeling of loving kindness. We want to get to know it in our bones, to play with the subtleties, and recognize the resonance. How strongly and sincerely can we feel this loving kindness? And then what does it feel like as its energy begins to wane?

After spending some time exploring how to generate, and stay with, the feeling of loving kindness, we begin extending it outwards from the heart in any way that is comfortable. We might visualize kindness spiraling to our circles of friends and family. Or, we might think of it as traveling door to door in our neighborhoods, then to the whole area, to the entire country, and to the whole planet. Eventually, we visualize it traveling limitlessly to all places everywhere in all the universes, which is described as the "three thousand worlds systems." Next, we move from extending loving kindness to the easier people in our lives, to extending it to those who have harmed us or with whom

we have issues. In each case, when the feeling is less than the strongest sincere strength we have generated in the previous meditation sessions, we go back to the first stage of becoming familiar with the feeling and try again.

## **A Brief Biography of Lord Jigten Sumgön and Commentary on the Bodhicitta Training**

*as dictated by H.H. Drikung Kabgyon Chetsang Rinpoche*

In the Kham region of Tibet there is a valley called Tsar Töyön Lung. In this valley is a village called Tsung-Ngu where Lord Jigten Sumgön was born. Lord Jigten Sumgön's father was Naljorpa Dorje, an emanation of Bhagavan Bhera and a descendent of the Drugyäl Kyura clan, who understood well the Abhidharma, the paramitas, and the tantra of the secret mantra, and who was a yogin of Vajrabhairava. His mother's name was Rakshisa Tsünma; she was a hidden yogini.

Even as a child, Lord Jigten Sumgön was seen to have extraordinary loving kindness and compassion. Later in life, while on a seven year retreat meditating in a cave, he contracted leprosy. At that time leprosy was a terrible and hopeless disease, so Jigten Sumgön prepared to leave his body by praying to Chenrezig. While doing so, he mentally compared his condition to that of other beings and developed great compassion for the suffering of others. That night, as he was thinking about the condition of others, he went into the samadi of loving kindness and felt the sickness leave him in the form of serpents. By morning he had attained enlightenment and the mahamudra state of Vajradhara.

Jigten Sumgön later composed a song about his experience. He said that it took him three days to compose the song, because people were unlikely to believe that anyone could attain enlightenment in one night. He went on to cure innumerable people of leprosy, became extremely popular, and was called, "The One Who Dreams Away Leprosy." This took place early in his adult life and was later referred to as the period of "Loving Kindness with Unfavorable Conditions." The remainder of his life was called, "Pure Loving Kindness."

Lord Jigten Sumgön gave many teachings on bodhicitta which were compiled by Sherab Che-nge Jungne and make up several volumes. A large part of these volumes are made up of the teachings called the *Great Instruction*. As in the Four Immeasurables prayer, we generally think of the meaning of loving kindness as the wish for all sentient beings to be happy, and the meaning of compassion as the wish for all beings to be free from suffering. Lord Jigten Sumgön's teachings are summarized in two parts: how to recognize bodhicitta; and how to practice bodhicitta.

**How to Recognize Bodhicitta:** It is important we know how to recognize bodhicitta. In some traditions it starts with loving oneself, but in the Mahayana tradition bodhicitta is primarily love directed towards others. We can recognize it as a clear, loving feeling, such as a mother has for her child, or a child has for her mother. However, bodhicitta is simply the loving wish to benefit others, to help, and is not directed towards any particular object.

Lord Jigten Sumgön said that it is much more difficult to develop loving kindness, than it is to develop compassion. If loving kindness arises relative to a loved one it is considered impure loving kindness. If it arises for all beings, including strangers, enemies, insects, and so forth, in the same way as for the most loveable small child, then it is pure. To arouse bodhicitta, we begin by thinking of all beings as small children or babies and allow feelings of fondness and love to well up within us. We may even come to desire to carry them in our arms.

**How to practice Bodhicitta:** How to practice Bodhicitta has three parts: practice, accomplishment, and application.

**Practice:** Place the body in the seven-point posture of meditation, with the mouth a little bit smiling, legs crossed or in the lotus position, and

hands in the Touching the Earth Mudra as Buddha Shakyamuni. Usually, one begins by contemplating the kindness of one's mother. However, Lord Jigten Sumgön predicted that in degenerate times it might be difficult to generate loving kindness thinking about our mother. He stated that if this was the case, then one could use any other person who has been of great benefit such as a good friend, or a spiritual teacher.

Because loving kindness is more difficult to fully realize than compassion, one should spend one to two weeks concentrating on recognizing the feeling of loving kindness. For the beginner, raising a strong feeling takes an average of fifteen days. Once the practice of loving kindness has been perfectly developed towards our mother, who has been most kind to us since our birth by unselfishly taking care of us, we then extend loving kindness to the people in our town or village. Then we extend it to all people south of Mount Meru, then to the east, west, north, and finally encompassing the whole world—this one world is considered one unit, or one world system. We then extend bodhicitta to 1,000 worlds. These 1,000 worlds now become a bigger one world system. Once again, we extend bodhicitta to 1,000 of these bigger world systems, i.e. to the third degree, and this too is one unit or one world system. We now spread loving kindness to 3,000 of these world systems, and this is the sphere of influence of Buddha Shakyamuni that is called, the Three Great Thousand World Systems.

We extend loving kindness to all the innumerable infinite world systems of the east, south, west, north, below us, and above us. Without exception, we perceive all sentient beings of the ten directions as our kind mothers. We extend the heart-felt wish for all beings, who are innumerable and boundless as the sky, to experience without limit the Four Immeasurables. Beginning with our mother or loved one, we gradually expand the loving kindness to include all sentient beings. If we cannot at first extend loving

kindness to all beings, we stop and start again at the beginning with the pure feeling of bodhicitta, and once again, step-by-step, extend the bodhicitta until we generate it fully in all ten directions to all sentient beings.

**Accomplishment:** Having recognized bodhicitta and practiced according to the instructions, we are to go now to a lonely place and sit in deep samadhi. Through this meditation we receive great power, and are able to practice without boundaries or limitations. We use this powerful means to benefit all beings, overcome disease, war, famine, drought, and so on. If you see an area of the country with unfavorable conditions such as these, sit in samadhi and develop love for the human beings of that area and also for all living beings in that land. In this way, unfavorable conditions are pacified. By wishing, “In this area may disease, war, famine, and so forth be subdued.” the conditions are pacified.

During the time of the Buddha a great sickness spread throughout Saravasti. Buddha’s disciple, Ananda, generated loving kindness that subdued the disease. Lord Jigten Sumgön even said that at the time of Guru Padmasambhava, the Mongols attacking Samaye Monastery may have been pacified by loving kindness. If you experience unfavorable conditions caused by spirits, demons, or other curses meditate on loving kindness to ward off the obstructers; in this way you overcome the difficulties. There are many stories of the efficacy of loving kindness meditation. When the Buddha was leaving this world, through his miraculous powers, all the weapons aimed at him were turned into flowers. By witnessing this, a non-Buddhist who was present also attained enlightenment. If you want to accomplish something for yourself and others in a certain direction, focus loving kindness in that direction; to overcome spirits, demons, and non-humans develop loving kindness for all beings, thus fulfilling your purpose.

Loving kindness is also very important on special occasions such as giving empowerments, teachings, and consecrating statues. On these occasions, you begin by meditating on loving kindness, extend it towards all beings including humans, non-humans, spirits, and demons of that area, and then spread it to all worlds. Again, to begin the practice, you start with a small area and gradually extend the loving kindness outward like ripples in a pool of water when a stone is dropped. In this way, your meditative concentration is not lost.

When consecrating new statues of a Buddha, sit in meditation and develop the samadhi of loving kindness, then sprinkle the statue with flowers. This is the best consecration. Similarly, when doing pujas, if you do pujas in a state of loving kindness the auspicious conditions and wishes are fulfilled. Loving kindness is especially important for spiritual teachers. When leading rituals or giving empowerments, loving kindness is indispensable; one cannot function without it. If you want to heal someone from sickness or make a tormo offering, you cannot do it without loving kindness. Without loving kindness, what small amounts of realization you possess might be lost in the process.

You can see the blessing power of loving kindness in daily life. A physician who knows the four tantras, but has not developed loving kindness, cannot effectively heal. On the other hand, someone who has less knowledge, but cultivates loving kindness, can heal another. If a yogi wants to heal someone who has a spirit or demon possessing them, he may become sick or possessed himself if he does not have proper knowledge of loving kindness. If a practitioner tries to heal without loving kindness, someone else might become sick or possessed. It is the same way with tantric knowledge and also for yogis practicing in isolation in the mountains. Whether they have good karma or not,

experience demons or not, have their wishes fulfilled or not, all depends on their experience of loving kindness.

**Application:** When using the power of the application of loving kindness (giving empowerments, healing, consecrating statues) you should be very careful. While you are in samadhi, if your state of meditation is disturbed by a negative thought or if a person disturbs you, your meditation becomes useless.

While sitting in meditation on loving kindness with a view to apply the power, concentrate specifically on that application. If your attention shifts, for example from war to famine, then the famine might be relieved, but your main aim of relieving war will not be accomplished. Or, for example, if a new statue is in front of you and your eyes shift to a statue in the distance, then that far statue is consecrated, not the one in front of you as you intended. At the time of application your body, speech, and mind should be controlled and disciplined. You should be in a state of mindfulness and awareness, not distracted for even a moment. Allow no negative thoughts to arise. In the case of a statue, never lose attention toward the object, even as you are scattering flowers over it. In certain texts relating to consecration, it is said that the long ceremony or puja is only the outer ceremony of consecration, for when a person is in the state of Mahamudra and watches or gazes at the statue, it is really consecrated at that point in time. It is the same with the state of loving kindness.

In developing the state of loving kindness, there are infinite benefits for both ourselves and others as we achieve our aims and goals. The benefits of practicing loving kindness are often mentioned in the sutras and are summarized by Nagarjuna in his *Letter to a King*:

*One is respected by humans and non-humans alike. One is protected by those beings and they will never harm you. Everyone is happy with you. Your mind is filled with joy. You will never be harmed by weapons or persons. Your fame will spread in all directions. After death you will be reborn in the highest realm of Brahma. By practicing loving kindness, you accumulate much merit and wisdom, leading towards Buddhahood. If you practice generosity three times a day, for many days, you create much merit. But if you meditate even for a moment on loving kindness, the merit is seven times greater. By practicing loving kindness, one is not attacked by demons or spirits, nor does one experience such things as quarreling or fighting.*

An example of these benefits is told in a story about Lord Jigten Sumgön. He was in an area of Tibet when a crop failed because of frost. When he saw this he sat in loving kindness meditation, and ever since that time, in an area that can be covered by a one person walking in a day, there has never again been a frost.

Loving kindness practice is very important for your private life as well. For instance, if you can sit in loving kindness samadhi, you can spread peace and harmony to your whole family. It is also a direct antidote to fear and hatred. Everything is interconnected; therefore, in society at large, loving kindness creates the peace and harmony which overcomes war. Why then are there so many unfavorable conditions in life? It is because our minds are functioning in a state opposite to loving kindness with thoughts of fear, hatred, and aggressiveness. We must subdue the mind! The main task of Dharma practice is to subdue the mind in order to be free from samsara.

Enlightenment is also dependent on loving kindness and compassion. The main cause of enlightenment is bodhicitta. The seed of enlightenment is bodhicitta. Lord Jigten Sumgön stated that enlightenment itself is the manifestation and embodiment of bodhicitta, in the same way that the manifestation of hatred is hell. In the words of Lord Phagmodrupa,

*Bodhicitta is like a plant. The earth and moisture that nourish it are loving kindness and compassion. Bodhicitta is the result.*

The essence of all the Buddha's teachings is love, compassion, and bodhicitta— if we practice these, there is no doubt we will achieve buddhahood.

## **A Practical Application**

I was in India when I received these meditation instructions and decided to go deeply into the practice. I committed myself to a five month isolated retreat high in the mountains. In this type of retreat you maintain silence and do not leave your room except to receive food. One month into the retreat, I received a message that my brother had been murdered. The monk who brought the message drove me to a phone to call my family and then returned me to my room. As the funeral had already taken place, I made the very difficult decision to complete the remaining four months of my commitment. I was left alone with this shocking news and, of course, could not go on as normal. Instead, I cried.

Even before becoming a nun, I took a vow to exclude no one from my heart. The prayer I said at the beginning of each day, to love my enemy, began to take on new meaning. I had to learn how to love my brother's murderer or break my vow and it felt like torture. All my meditations began to take on heightened meaning because I felt that they were the only thing that would save my sanity.

The simple meditation of loving kindness became my whole practice. I sought to touch base with the feeling of compassion and kindness just to feel something other than grief. To summon the feeling of loving kindness, for more than seconds, was very difficult under the circumstances. My mind would fly to my brother lying alone dying, having been shot for a few dollars, or to my mother who was in tremendous pain.

My healing began when I sat, visualized my spiritual teachers, and experienced their love. I then explored what it would feel like to love whoever

came to mind and to love each equally. I imagined the Buddha loving me and also loving the murderer. Over time, I began to let go of my own grief and extended loving kindness to my brother and to my family. But, I still was unable to even think of my brother's killer.

After some weeks, the killer began appearing in my imagination on the edge of a crowd. I continued sending kindness to my family, colleagues, neighbors, and strangers, but the flow would stop cold as my mind touched upon the thought of my brother's killer. In despair I inwardly called out for help. Then I had a dream. In it my teachers were beside me, holding me with love, and encouraging me. Step-by-step they showed me that if I could love them and see their nature as pure compassion, then it was possible I could come to see that all living beings shared that same nature. If I accepted that my teachers became who they were because the perfection of love was within, and if I believed that I was of that same nature, then it must also hold true that the murderer had the exact same nature, albeit encased in the cement of confusion.

I repeated the meditation over and over again. Each time my mind stopped sending out loving kindness, I returned to the beginning of the meditation and rested again in the feeling of loving kindness. Then, once again, I allowed it to flow outward and alternated between cradling my brother in kindness and glancing at the murderer. I continued this way for some days and then, one day, the killer was no longer there. Instead, in his place there was a baby! In my mind, whatever caused him to become a crazed drug dealer was gone and, in its place, I saw the seed of something lovable. I felt as if my sanity was restored and resumed my planned retreat.

## Putting Meditation Training into Practice

After receiving a wonderful introduction to this meditation technique, we take the instructions home and find ourselves alone on a cushion. Each meditation session in the loving kindness exercise allows different kinds of beings to arise in our minds. We slowly understand that when we pray for “all sentient beings” we exclude no one. Spending uninterrupted time with this training exercise enables us to touch our capacity to love, but also can summon our inner demons. For instance, the Drikung lineage version of *The Four Immeasurables* prayer invites us to consider those whom we may fear:

*May all sentient beings, especially those enemies  
who hate me, obstructers who harm me, and those  
who create obstacles on my path to liberation and  
all knowingness....*

It’s not difficult to think about the welfare of those we love, or the welfare of those we don’t know, but who seem similar to us. It is harder for us to imagine extending ourselves further, but we may be willing to try, if it feels safe. However, counter-intuitive to all instinct, we are to practice putting our enemies first. In the foundation practices, for instance, as we bow to the lineage we visualize our mother standing to our left, our father standing to our right, and our enemies standing in front of us.

It seems that at our most basic psychological levels we are conditioned to act primarily for our own benefit. However, we can change these instinctual patterns of defense and aggression if we aspire to be of benefit to all beings, wishing that all of them, even our enemies, experience happiness. In this way, we begin to unravel our habitual mental patterns of being primarily concerned with our own happiness and welfare. Repeating this aspiration over

and over again, we gradually retrain our minds. By thinking about the welfare of others, we begin to let go of our layers of self-absorption and narrowness of heart that are the cause of our deepest suffering.

Through these meditations, we begin to see how we are trapped by our own mind. It is our peace that is disturbed when we hold onto pain, anger, and grasping. Over time, we begin to recognize the similarities of our various wounds. It becomes more and more apparent to us when we notice that the perceived pain in different scenarios is similar, and it's only the actors in our dramas that get recast. Looking at individual situations, we may feel justified in our anger or fear, but once the pattern is visible to us, it becomes our own responsibility to change. When we perceive how we trap ourselves, we also begin to have compassion for all the other players involved. The same emotional event arising within us day after day moves us from pain, to recognition, and, finally, to wanting to do something about our own reactions. It becomes possible to move slowly and gently through our fears and anger and we begin to recognize our common humanity with the 'enemy.' Both of us are trapped by our negative patterns. As we begin to let them go bit by bit, they dissipate until, finally, they are gone.

### **Three Things to Keep in Mind**

Meditation is heroic work. At a fundamental level, many of us feel that there is something broken inside us; that we have an unnamed and unidentified wound. The simple fact is that we all have pain just below the surface simply because we are human. This pain might not even surface until we become quiet or sit to meditate. We often would rather not risk encountering it by becoming still. Thus, to move through our resistance and into meditation, we regularly have to re-teach ourselves the Dharma. It can help us tremendously to keep three things in mind: inherent perfection; self compassion; and innate joy.

**Buddha Nature—The View of Inherent Perfection:** When I began to study Buddhism, it felt like I was entering an entirely different world as I was introduced to a vastly unfamiliar view of reality. The Buddhist view is that we are all perfect within, and the many forms of meditation taught can clear away the confusion that clouds our minds and hearts. As a child, I incessantly read about the lives of the saints. Their capacity to love seemed beyond human to me. Unfortunately, there were no actual saints around to talk to, in spite of my wandering around in the woods as an adolescent and hoping for visions. Alas, nothing ever happened, so I went in search of living wisdom instead.

The Tibetan teachers I eventually met assured me that all humans are capable of displaying the same kind of love that awed me as a youngster. They demonstrated this capacity through their own lives and considered it a matter of training. They followed in the footsteps of their teachers, became that way themselves, and made it possible for anyone to train in the same way. Sainthood was within, they said, not anywhere outside of us.

The Buddhist view teaches that our goodness is covered up by clouds of confusion. Holding the conviction that we have this goodness within can imbue us with the courage to return again and again to our meditation cushion. It can be very difficult to believe that there is truly nothing wrong with us and no need to become someone different or someone better.

*Nothing whatsoever is to be removed  
Not the slightest thing is to be added  
Truth looking at truth, truth is seen,  
When seen, this is complete liberation.*

*Uttara Tantra*

This quote from a text on Buddha Nature talks about our mind's ultimate nature. From this perspective our negative, cruel, aggressive thoughts are only a transitory storm. Our true abiding nature is vast, spacious, compassionate, and inviolate and cannot be affected by our thoughts and actions. There is no permanent darkness. Our unwholesome thoughts and actions create within us confusion that hides our ultimate Buddha nature, sometimes even from ourselves. Moreover, this ultimate nature exists in all beings. We have the same ultimate nature as the Dalai Lama, as our friends, our enemies, all animals, and even insects. We all share the same inner perfection.

There is great power in this view of reality. One of the gifts of my Catholic childhood was the practice of reflection to prepare for weekly confession. This eventually led to a sense of clear ethics as an adult. However, as a six-year old I took this practice very seriously, perhaps too seriously. Even now, as an adult, I can mentally magnify the slightest error and agonize over it. This kind of self-deprecation seems to be rampant in our Western society. But, through the view of inner perfection, I now understand that the wounds of life,

whether received from others or self inflicted, are impermanent. Our thoughts are like clouds that cover the sky, but eventually disperse. Mental pain is merely a passing storm in limitless space and space itself cannot be harmed, even by the fiercest tornado. The view of Buddha Nature encourages us to treat both our enemies and ourselves with equal kindness and compassion. As we look long and hard inside ourselves, we discover that under the feeling of brokenness there is goodness.

**Self Compassion:** As we spend more and more time in meditation, we may begin to see our lives as if from a distance, perhaps as if they were on a screen before us. Like peeling an onion, all our hidden shames and blames can arise. We can feel naked and be harsh judges of our own actions. This, for me, was the most painful inner commentary to endure, but, ultimately, we must learn to forgive ourselves. We summon the courage to look within by reminding ourselves that there is no dark well of bottomless anger and pain.

I learned from Pema Chodron that it is only to the degree we have compassion for ourselves, that we can authentically have compassion for others. We desperately want to avoid the pain of self-recriminating thoughts, and when we experience self-judgment, it can keep us from acknowledging how we have harmed others. Compassion and gentleness directed towards our self helps us move beyond defensiveness, shame, and so forth, to unmask the pain underlying our negative thoughts and actions. Learning to see our own frailties connects us to all humanity and we can begin to feel, rather than inwardly flee. We come to the understanding that, just like us, other people are also consumed by suffering when they speak and act negatively.

**Innate Joy:** As our clouds of confusion dissipate, like a tiny hidden spring, joy wells up inside us. Joy already exists at our deepest level. It is inherent within; nothing outside of us produces it. Once tasted, our confidence

in its existence grows and we gain the courage to continue. Knowing that joy is within, it is easier to sit out the storms, open ourselves up to all who arise on our path, and continue on when we lose our way.

## Parting Gift

There is a story from Buddha's life about Mara, the evil tempter:

*On the eve of Buddha's enlightenment, Mara marshaled armies of warriors who tried to shoot Buddha with arrows while he was in meditation. In response, Buddha generated great kindness and turned the arrows into flowers to defeat Mara. Many years later, Mara came to Buddha's door and asked to see him, but Buddha's attendant pushed Mara away. Buddha corrected his attendant, welcomed Mara, and served him tea.*

In my experience, Mara returns to us again and again. When the 'evil tempter' visits me, I practice seeing negative states of mind as old friends coming to visit. As my mind sheds limiting or destructive views my view shifts. The greatest lessons of my life have come from applying these instructions. My aspiration is that these essays will allow this powerful practice to be similarly useful for you.

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Khenmo Drolma

**Khenmo Nyima Drolma** is the Abbess of Vajra Dakini Nunnery. She has trained with the foremost spiritual teachers of our time including H.H. Dalai Lama, H.H. Drikung Kyabgon Chetsang Rinpoche (the head of the Drikung Kagyu Lineage) She is a heart student of Ven. Dhyani Ywahoo, studying closely with her for over 25 years. She spent two years in training at Gampo Abbey guided by Ven. Pema Chödrön. In 2002 she took full ordination as a Buddhist nun in Taiwan becoming the first woman in the Drikung lineage to do so. In 2004 she was installed as a Khenmo in the Drikung lineage, becoming the first westerner in her lineage to hold the responsibility of abbot. Since then she has worked continuously to establish Vajra Dakini Nunnery and teach the Dharma internationally.

Khenmo Drolma, a breast cancer survivor, has spent many years in the Hospice field. She served as an Art Fellow at the Connecticut Hospice and board member of the Addison Respite Care Home in Vermont and Maine Respite Home.