

# Buddhism with an Attitude

## **The Tibetan Seven-Point Mind-Training**

by B. Alan Wallace

edited by Lynn Quirolo

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## Preface

All of us have attitudes. Some of them accord with reality and serve us well throughout the course of our lives. Others are out of alignment with reality, and they cause us unnecessary problems. Tibetan Buddhist practice isn't just sitting in silent meditation; it's developing fresh attitudes that align our minds with reality. Attitudes need adjusting, just like a spinal column that has been knocked out of alignment. Among the many types of practices in Tibetan Buddhism, in this book I will explain a type of mental training Tibetans call *lojong*, which is designed to shift our attitudes so that our minds become pure wellsprings of joy instead of murky pools of problems, anxieties, fleeting pleasures, frustrations, hopes, and fears. The Tibetan word *lojong* is made up of two parts: *lo* means attitude, mind, intelligence, and perspective; and *jong* means to train, purify, remedy, and clear away. So the word *lojong* could literally be translated as *attitudinal training*, but I'll stick with the more common translation of *mind-training*.

Over the past millennium, Tibetan lamas have devised many lojongs, but the most widely taught and practiced of all lojongs in the Tibetan language was one based on the teachings of an Indian Buddhist sage named Atisha (982-1054), whose life spanned the end of the first millennium of the common era and the beginning of the second. Atisha brought to Tibet an oral tradition of lojong teachings that was based on instructions that had been passed down to

him through the lineage of the Indian Buddhist teachers Maitriyogin, Dharmarakshita, and Serlingpa. This oral tradition may represent the earliest such practice that was explicitly called a lojong, and it is probably the most widely practiced in the whole of Tibetan Buddhism. This training was initially given only as an oral instruction for those students who were deemed sufficiently intelligent and highly enough motivated to make good use of it. Only about a century after Atisha's death was this secret training written down and made more widely available in monasteries and hermitages, Tibet's unique kinds of attitudinal correction facility. This delay probably accounts for the minor variations in the different versions of the text we have today. For centuries we in the West have wondered whether intelligent life exists elsewhere in the universe. If there are highly advanced, intelligent beings out there, what might they have to teach us? What have they learned that we have not? Along similar lines we can ask: is there intelligent life on our planet outside of our Euro-American civilization? Of course that sounds like a dumb question, but it's still worth asking, since there still persists an attitude in our society that we know more about everything than any previous generation and more than any other, "less developed" society today. It takes quite an ethnocentric leap of faith to swallow that, but many people seem to manage it. Indian civilization a thousand years ago, during the time of Atisha, had evolved with very little influence from European civilization; and Tibetan civilization, tracing back more than two millennia, was hardly influenced by the West until the mid-twentieth century. Ironically, Tibetans' first major encounter with Western thought occurred due to the invasion of their homeland by the Chinese Communists in 1949, who forced upon them the economic doctrine of Marxism and scientific materialism.

Have Indian and Tibetan civilizations made any great discoveries of their own that we have not, and might they have anything to teach us? I will be tackling these questions throughout this book, drawing on a thousand-year-old set of aphorisms that embody much of the wisdom of ancient India and Tibet. If these aphorisms strike a chord of wisdom for us living today, whose lives span the end of the second millennium and the beginning of the third, that wisdom will be something that is not uniquely Eastern or Western, and not ancient or modern. It will be a type of wisdom that cuts across such cultural divides and eras, something universal that speaks deeply to and from the hearts and minds of humanity.

Over the past millennium, Tibetan Buddhism has maintained its vitality from generation to generation by teachers passing on oral commentaries to traditional "root texts" such as the Seven-Point Mind-Training. Root texts preserve the depth and wisdom of the teachings, and the oral commentaries link these texts with the experiences and views of practitioners of each generation. In the explanation of the text I offer here, I draw upon the earliest Tibetan commentary I have been able to find, composed by Sechil Buwa, who was a direct disciple of Chekawa Yeshe Dorje (1101-1175), who first wrote down this mind-training. Chekawa Yeshe Dorje had received the transmission of this teaching from Sharawa, and the lineage before him goes back to Langri Thangpa, Potowa, Dromtonpa, and Atisha. I also draw on a very recent commentary entitled *Enlightened Courage: An Explanation of Atisha's Seven Point Mind Training* by the late Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, one of the greatest Tibetan meditation masters of the twentieth century.

The teacher from whom I received the oral commentary on this training was a learned, humble, and compassionate Tibetan named Kungo Barshi. I was living in Dharamsala,

India, at the time, in 1973, and there were many erudite lamas from whom I could have sought this instruction. But I was particularly drawn to Kungo Barshi for various reasons. At that time, he was the chief instructor in Tibetan medicine at the Tibetan Astro-Medical Institute, and he was renowned for his mastery of many of the fields of traditional Tibetan knowledge. But he was not only an outstanding scholar. As a member of the nobility in Tibet, he had owned several estates and devoted himself to the life of a gentleman scholar, while his wife largely took over the practical affairs of running their estates. But when the Chinese Communists invaded Tibet and especially targeted the aristocracy for imprisonment and torture, he, his wife, and one of his sons fled to India. Others of his children remained behind, only to be killed by the Chinese, and the son who fled with him into exile also met a tragic end. Adversity mounted upon adversity in Kungo Barshi's life, and yet when he was passing on this teaching to me, he told me, "Personally, I have found the Chinese invasion of Tibet to be a blessing. In Tibet before this cataclysm, I took much for granted, and my spiritual practice was casual. Now that I have been forced into exile and have lost so much, my dedication to practice has grown enormously, and I have found greater contentment than ever before." Rarely have I met anyone whose presence exuded such serenity, quiet good cheer, and wisdom as he did. He was for me a living embodiment of the efficacy of this mind-training, and his inspiration has been with me ever since.

As I pass on my own commentary to this text, I address many practical and theoretical issues that uniquely face us in the modern world. This book is based on a series of public lectures I gave in Santa Barbara, California, during the years 1997-1998. Tapes of those lectures were transcribed and edited by my old and dear friend Lynn Quirolo, to

whom I owe a deep debt of gratitude; then I made final revisions to the edited transcripts. I have tried at all times to be faithful to the original teachings I received, while making them thoroughly contemporary to people living in a world so different from that of traditional Tibet. If even a fraction of the wisdom and inspiration of Atisha, Sechil Buwa, Kungo Barshi, and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche is conveyed to the readers of this book, our efforts will have born good fruit.

B. Alan Wallace  
Santa Barbara, California  
Summer, 2000

## The First Point: **The Preliminaries**

First, train in the preliminaries.

The goal of Dharma practice is to realize a state of genuine well-being that flows from a wellspring of awareness that is pure and unobscured. The ancient Greeks called such a state *eudaimonia*, a truth-given joy. The ancient Indians called it *mahasukha*, great bliss that arises not from pleasurable stimuli, but from the nature of one's own pure awareness itself. This is not simply a happy feeling; it is a state of being that underlies and suffuses all emotional states, that embraces all the joys and sorrows that come our way. It is a way of engaging with life without confusion. The ancient Greeks knew about it. The Indians and Tibetans know about it. Funny that we don't have a word for it in modern English. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that we know a lot more about mental disease than we do about mental health.

Years ago I asked the Director of the National Institute of Mental Health how the medical profession defined mental health. He replied that they didn't have any widely agreed upon definition, *for they didn't have enough data!* They have plenty of data on mental disorders, though, and according to conservative estimates, one in five persons, at least in



the United States, will have a serious, diagnosable, and treatable mental disorder some time during their lifetime.<sup>1</sup>

Even for those of us who are not presently suffering from a diagnosable mental disease, it's high time to ask: what's so great about being normal? When we're normal, we're still subject to a wide range of mental problems, with their resultant distress. Let's now ask the provocative question: how mentally healthy could we possibly be? Is there a limit? How in touch with reality would we have to be to achieve supreme mental health? A path that has stood the test of centuries is the practice of Dharma. And what is Dharma? One meaning of "Dharma" is simply truth, specifically those truths that, when realized, lead to a state of genuine, lasting happiness that is not contingent upon pleasurable stimuli. In terms of our overall well-being, Dharma includes important truths concerning diet, exercise, and medication, as well as spiritual practice. Indeed, the theories and practices of traditional Tibetan medicine are commonly viewed by its practitioners as integral elements of Dharma.<sup>2</sup>

In the Tibetan Buddhist context, there are several criteria for discriminating between what is and is not Dharma. One criterion for Dharma is whether or not a theory or practice leads to spiritual awakening. From a traditional viewpoint, another criterion for Dharma is anything that aids spiritual awakening in this life or *beyond this life*. Using this criterion, there are ways of conduct and ways of viewing reality that are beneficial beyond the context of this present life. There is a third very pragmatic criterion for determining what can be considered Dharma that doesn't depend on belief in enlightenment or reincarnation. This criterion of practicing Dharma is engaging with all events in ways that are realistic and conducive to one's own and others' well-being. When things go well, are there ways to experience deeper joy and satisfaction? When things go wrong, is there

anything we can do that would still enhance our overall well-being? Ways of bringing forth a sense of fulfillment and meaning during the inevitable ups and downs of life are also considered Dharma.

These three criteria define Dharma but are not exclusive to Buddhism. Dharma can be found in non-Buddhist paths and even outside of religious practice altogether. The test of whether a practice or theory is Dharma is whether it results in benefit throughout the inevitable vicissitudes of life.

On the one hand, we may feel Dharma practice seems difficult, time-consuming, and filled with problems. From another perspective, if what we really want is to practice Dharma, we get immediate gratification. Dharma can be practiced anytime: on happy occasions or when we are sick. Just as soon as we want to practice, we can. But if Dharma is practiced only as a means to an end, such as to get more money or have people like us, then we are in a situation of delayed gratification.

What does it mean to "practice Dharma"? It is not one technique, not just meditation. You can develop a repertoire of Dharma practices for every occasion. When you start to understand the richness and diversity of Dharma practice, you will see that even if you are stressed out, tired, or depressed, you can still practice. Even when you are dying, you can practice Dharma. You can become a skillful chef of Dharma using its rich and varied recipes to make any situation into a source of fulfillment and happiness. When what you really want is to practice Dharma, you find more and more ability to do so in a wider variety of situations. Dharma is like medicine; it is designed to help stop the habitual behaviors and attitudes that impede the capacity of the mind to heal itself. The more you practice Dharma, the more Dharma unveils your natural inborn happiness.

Buddhist science deals with psychology; it is a very deep analysis of how the mind works, how the emotions work, and how perception works. It also has a great deal to offer in the area of logic, and insights into cosmology. Buddhism as a religion is, of course, talking about overcoming problems in future lifetimes, gaining liberation from rebirth, and becoming an enlightened Buddha. But if we look just in terms of the psychology and philosophy, they can help us to minimize our suffering and problems in this lifetime, too. We can challenge them with counteracting forces. We can change our attitude. With a change of attitude, our whole experience will change. I could be trying to finish a project at work, and I could look at it as very difficult – so horrible that I will never be able to finish it. Then I really suffer.

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Buddhism (/ˈbʊdɪzəm/, US: /ˈbuːd-/) is the world's fourth-largest religion with over 520 million followers, or over 7% of the global population, known as Buddhists. Buddhism encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs and spiritual practices largely based on original teachings attributed to the Buddha (born Siddhārtha Gautama in the 5th or 4th century BCE) and resulting interpreted philosophies. It originated in ancient India as a Sramana tradition sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE