

MEDICINE BUDDHA TEACHINGS

by
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INTRODUCTION

ACCORDING TO THE TEACHINGS OF THE BUDDHA SHAKYAMUNI, recorded in the *Sutra on Entering the Womb*, there are four classes of illness. The first includes illnesses which are relatively inconsequential, and from these illnesses one will recover whether or not one takes medicines.

The second class of illness includes more serious, even dangerous, illnesses, but if one takes the appropriate medicines, one will recover from these as well. A modern update of this category would surely include many effective modern medical procedures, such as acupuncture, surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, etc.

The third class of illness includes those for which medicines are of no use, illnesses from which one cannot recover simply through the use of medicines or other medical procedures. These illnesses, however, can be cured-and one can thereby recover one's health-through the practice of appropriate spiritual techniques taught in the buddhadharma.

The fourth class of illness includes those which have a karmically determined irreversibly terminal nature. When one's body manifests such an illness, death is inevitable and no amount of medicine or medical procedure can prevent it. In fact, the use of medicines in such cases-with the exception of narcotics for pain-only serves to increase one's suffering.

The teachings on the Medicine Buddha which follow in these pages, given by the extraordinary Tibetan meditation master and scholar Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, are intended most particularly for those who are suffering from the third class of illness, illnesses for which no successful medical treatment has been found, but which are still curable through the practice of profound spiritual techniques. In the Buddhist tradition the most notable of these techniques are the spiritual practices associated with the Medicine Buddha. Through such practices, the innate healing powers inherent in the basic nature of all sentient beings can be uncovered and accessed. In this way sick persons can cure themselves of the illnesses that medicines and medical procedures are unable to cure.

As normal human beings we have a tendency to think that illnesses are physically based and require physical solutions. Therefore, it is reasonable to ask how it is possible that spiritual practice can help the body cure itself. This question becomes even more critical for those who have no faith in the miraculous powers of a creator god. But if one has confidence in or even an intimation of any kind of spiritual reality that transcends the limitations of a strictly material universe, then one will find oneself extremely interested in the answer to this question provided by the Buddhist tradition.

In the vajrayana tradition of Buddhism, we would answer this question-how one can cure oneself through spiritual practice-from two perspectives: from the perspective of the ultimate truth of the nature of reality and from the perspective of relative truths, which discuss how things appear to us when we have not yet realized the ultimate truth of the nature of reality.

From the standpoint of ultimate truth, all phenomena, including all the phenomena that we misapprehend as physical matter, are empty of any inherent existence. Though they appear to be very solid and real to us, they are in truth mere illusory appearances lacking any substantial reality, like a light show in space, like the aurora borealis, a rainbow, an echo, a flash of lightning, a mirage, a magical display, a dream, an hallucination, like the images in movies and on television, or like the reflection of the moon in water. None of these illusory appearances, including what we take to be matter, have any true, separate, permanent, solid or substantial

existence independent of ever-changing equally non-existent causes and conditions. When scientists today investigate and scrutinize the atoms which we for centuries have thought of as the building blocks of the material world, they find no indivisible and, therefore, permanent particles of matter. They find mostly space with variously described sorts of energies rushing around within it. These energies are also insubstantial, impermanent, and unpredictable. They cannot be said to have any kind of permanent existence. The more scientists investigate, the more illusory the nature of matter appears. The Buddha discovered this same truth in meditation 2,500 years ago, and the Buddhist tradition has been teaching it ever since.

All phenomena are ephemeral, constantly changing in the same way as the appearances within a kaleidoscope constantly change. None of these illusory appearances-including the appearances of sickness and disease, which are also mere empty appearances-has the power to cause us suffering unless we mistakenly apprehend them as real and substantial. When we misapprehend these appearances, when we take them to be real, we fixate on them and thereby cause them to solidify in our experience. This gives them the appearance of solid, substantial reality, and then in our lives these illnesses do, in fact, become for us very real and solid, and we suffer from them.

Still, though everything that we experience is empty of any kind of substantial existence, we still experience something. What is it that we experience? We experience mind.

In discussing the nature of things, or the nature of appearances, which in the ultimate analysis are merely empty, insubstantial radiations or light-manifestations of an equally empty and insubstantial, though luminous, mind, Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche expresses the teachings of the Buddha given 2,500 years ago in the third turning of the wheel of dharma, his third great cycle of teachings:

Before meditating, before recognizing things to be as they are, one will have seen the radiance of this mind as solid external things that are sources of pleasure and pain. But through practicing meditation, and through coming to recognize things as they are, you will come to see that all of these appearances are merely the display or radiance or light of the mind which experiences them.

When one is able *truly* to recognize sickness and disease as “merely the display or radiance or light of the mind which experiences them,” empty of any inherent substantial existence, then one’s suffering disappears. Regardless of which of the first three categories of illness one is suffering from, if one is able to recognize its true nature - that it is merely the empty magical display or radiance or light of the mind which experiences it - one will experience no suffering, and depending on the level and completeness of this realization, one’s illness will dissolve in the empty pure primordial expanse, and one will be cured. Even if one is afflicted by the fourth category of illness and it is karmically inevitable that one will die from that particular illness, one will die without suffering or fear, because all phenomena, including illness, are empty. They lack any kind of substantial, permanent reality independent of equally empty and interdependent causes and conditions. They are all merely insubstantial, ever-changing, kaleidoscopic light shows in the primordially pure open expanse of empty luminous awareness.

This is the view of illness and disease from the standpoint of ultimate truth, and it is very useful and helpful to understand. It must be remembered, however, that ultimate truth can never be accurately expressed through words and conceptual constructs. Words and concepts, even the verbal concept “ultimate truth,” can never be more than “the finger pointing at the moon.” They

are not “the moon” itself. Ultimate truth ultimately is inexpressible in words or concepts.

Although the Buddha Shakyamuni gave many teachings on ultimate truth, he recognized that were he only to give teachings on ultimate truth, the vast majority of sentient beings would neither be able to understand them nor be able to make spiritual progress based upon them. Therefore, the Buddha also taught what is known as relative truth, which is the truth of things expressed in terms and ideas that ordinary people can understand. They can understand relative truth more easily because it accords more closely to the manner in which they currently perceive and understand the world and their own personal experience. The Buddha taught a great variety of relative truths, because there are a great variety of beings who have a great variety of differing dispositions, interests, and aptitudes. In this way, the Buddha presented truths, and spiritual paths based on these truths, that would be beneficial to people in the short run, while gradually pointing the way to progressively deeper and more profound spiritual understanding in the long run.

From the perspective of relative truth, everything that we experience—including all the various kinds of happiness and well-being as well as all the various types of suffering—arises from causes and conditions. If we experience happiness, good health, and spiritual growth, we do so because we have practiced virtue in the past. If we experience sorrow and other forms of suffering, we do so because we have engaged in unvirtuous or negative activity in the past, in harmful and evil deeds of various sorts. This principle of cause and effect explains the existence of illness and disease. If we suffer illness or disease of any sort, it is not because of some sort of accidental physical cause unrelated to our own past negative actions of body, speech, and mind. Rather, all diseases and illnesses, and all physical suffering arising out of disease and illness, arise as a result of negative karma—as a result of evil deeds of body, speech, and mind.

When these evil or unskillful deeds are minor, they will exhaust themselves naturally and one will get well whether or not one uses medicines. The duration of the illnesses arising out of such minor evil deeds will vary according to the frequency and period of time over which one committed such evil or unskillful deeds, as well as upon the factor of spiritual practice.

If these evil or unskillful deeds are serious, and yet we live in a time when, as a result of good causes arising out of virtuous actions we personally and collectively have performed in the past, there are effective medicines and medical procedures available which can cure us, and if we use them, we will recover from our illness or illnesses through the use of these medicines and procedures.

If the karmic causes of our illness or illnesses are extremely severe and we have not reached the eighth bhumi of bodhisattvic enlightenment— at which point we can transcend all physical illness if we so desire—then we will surely die of that illness.

But if the karmic causes of our illness or illnesses are so strong that medicines and medical procedures cannot cure us, but not so strong as to determine the certainty of imminent death based on that illness, and if we are willing to exert ourselves in the practice of dharma, then dharma practice can cure us. In such cases, the practice of the Medicine Buddha is invaluable.

When we speak of evil deeds or unskillful actions as being the causes of our illnesses, it is vitally important that we understand that these evil deeds are not simply the deeds of our body and speech, but also of our mind. Of course, if we kill out of anger and aggression, these actions create strong negative karma that leave strong negative imprints in our mental continuum. If these negative imprints are not purified by spiritual practice, they will subsequently give rise to a variety of circumstances: to our being killed, to illness, to mental suffering—including increased

anger and aggression and the continuing desire and irresistible urge to kill-and to being born in desolate environments in which there is lots of killing or even perpetual warfare. All of this depends on and is conditioned by the frequency and the intensity of our killing and the intensity of the emotions motivating and driving our killing. One should always remember, however, that these causes can be purified and that one can avoid such calamity through spiritual practice.

Short of physically engaging in killing, if out of anger and aggression we say such things as, "I hate you so much I am going to kill you," or "I hate you so much, I could kill you," or "You are a despicable being and I hate you," or simply "I hate you," or "your behavior is despicable and I am very angry with you," then we are still creating verbal and mental karma which can become the basis of illness.

But even if we neither kill nor express angry and hateful sentiments, if we merely harbor in mind and ruminate on anger and hatred and resentment and bitterness towards others, and thereby reinforce these sentiments and cause them to grow stronger and increasingly intractable, these actions of our minds will still give rise to illness. There is no medicine that will cure this type of illness completely, because its causes are not physical. Its causes are mental and emotional, and unless these causes exhaust themselves naturally, the only way that this type of illness can truly be cured is by purifying the mental and emotional causes that give rise to it. This is one of the reasons why the practice of forgiveness is so important.

Forgiveness in this sense does not mean that out of my exalted or greater goodness and/or superior wisdom, I magnanimously forgive the person whom I imagine to be responsible for my anger, hatred and/or resentment. It means rather that I recognize that regardless of what another may do to me, my anger or hatred-and the harm that it can do to me physically, emotionally, and mentally-is my own. It comes from nowhere else but my own mind, the character of which has been formed by my own actions, both negative and positive. Recognizing this truth and making the appropriate mental adjustments is the basis of reviving mental, emotional, and physical health, which in turn becomes the basis of true reconciliation with others. Since the practice of the Medicine Buddha derives its effect from the powerful and rapid purification of mental and emotional negativity and of the karmic causes that give rise to such negativity, the Medicine Buddha is a particularly powerful spiritual technique for accomplishing such forgiveness, revivification, and reconciliation.

The practice of the Medicine Buddha is also invaluable in counteracting any sort of illness arising out of excessive desire, including addiction or addictive behavior: relationship addiction, drug addiction, alcohol addiction, over-eating addiction, addiction to using harsh words, etc. When the Buddha first taught about the origin of suffering, the Second Noble Truth, he taught that it was *tanha* (Pali), which has been translated as "thirsting" or "craving." In modern day parlance, *tanha* might also be translated as "addiction." The idea of *tanha* or addiction is that one's thirsting or craving after something is so strong that one finds it extremely difficult, if not nearly impossible, to resist grasping after the object of one's desire. The practice of the Medicine Buddha, if engaged in with effort and concentration and with the primary intention of reversing or purifying one's addiction, quite naturally increases the "No." in one's system, and enables one with increasingly less struggle to let go of and finally give up one's addictive behavior. Therefore, the practice of the Medicine Buddha is invaluable.

Most of the time, of course, we have no idea why we are ill. This comes about as a consequence of our present inability to recognize many of the various negative emotions that we suppress in our minds and to "see," with the eye of wisdom, the karmic deeds, usually committed in previous lives, which are responsible for such emotions and for our illnesses. These recog-

nitions are the prerequisite for “seeing” directly the relationship between negative mental/emotional states and evil deeds on the one hand, and illnesses on the other. The practice of the Medicine Buddha will also eventually remove the obscurations of mind that block such recognitions. In the meantime, if we understand the general principle of karmic cause and effect and have confidence in the possibility of spiritual purification, we can practice the Medicine Buddha and attain results long before the dawning of such spiritual insight.

All of these benefits come about because the basis of all illness is evil deeds and the emotional defilements that give rise to them. The practice of the Medicine Buddha is one of the most profound ways of purifying such deeds and defilements and the karmic imprints that they leave in the mind that subsequently arise in the form of illness and compulsive behavior. In this way, the Medicine Buddha removes the causes of our illnesses and the illnesses themselves.



It is useful to understand how the Medicine Buddha fits into the teachings of the Buddha in general and into the vajrayana teachings of the Buddha in particular.

All of the Buddha’s teachings can be subsumed under the two categories of shamatha and vipashyana—calm abiding (mental tranquility) and spiritual insight. In the hinayana traditions of Buddhism the intention of the vipashyana teachings is to establish the lack of true existence of the individual—sometimes called one-fold egolessness or the selflessness of the individual—and the lack of true existence of gross material phenomena or things. The intention of the vipashyana teachings of the first half of the mahayana teachings—contained in the second turning of the wheel of dharma—is to extend this understanding to include the lack of true existence of even the most subtle phenomena, including atoms and subatomic matter, energy, time, and all forms of consciousness itself. These two understandings together are referred to as two-fold egolessness or the selflessness of the individual and the selflessness of phenomena. Both of these formulations are included in the terms *shunyata* and emptiness.

The second half of the mahayana teachings—the third turning of the wheel of dharma—goes on to teach that emptiness is not simply a mere nothingness, nor merely the other side of the coin of interdependence, nor even simply a state beyond all conceptuality. The third turning teaches that this emptiness—while lacking any limiting characteristics, such as color, shape, size, location, substance, or gender, and being empty of all cognitive and emotional obscurations—is not empty of its own nature, the radiant clarity of mind, which includes all aspects of reality and which we refer to as clear light. In this empty radiant clarity inheres as one undifferentiable quality all the positive qualities that we normally conceptualize as being distinct from one another, such as intelligence, wisdom, compassion, skillful means, devotion, confidence, healing power, etc. Various manifestations of this quality arise out of the clear light nature in the form of the deities of the vajrayana tradition such as the Medicine Buddha, Vajrayogini, Tara, Vajradhara, Vajrasattva, or Chenrezig. And although it is said, from the standpoint of relative truth, that some, if not all, of these deities actually do exist as individual beings who can be supplicated, they exist as such because, and only because, the qualities that they embody were already inherent in the clear light nature, the buddha nature, of their own minds when they were confused sentient beings, just as they inherently exist today in the minds of all confused beings.

The essential nature of all deities can be better understood by understanding the essential

nature of their body, speech, and mind. The body of the deity is the union of appearance and emptiness and emerges in the practitioner's experience when the experience of perceiver and perceived is purified. Of what is it purified? It is purified of grasping and fixation and of all the obscurations of mind that arise from grasping and fixation. It is purified of the perceptual grasping or clinging to a self, and the perceptual fixating on everything perceived as being other to the self. In the words of Guru Rinpoche, 'Perceiver and perceived when purified are the body of the deity, clear emptiness.

The speech of the deity is the union of sound and emptiness. We all know that sound is intangible, but sounds without the experience of their emptiness have tremendous power to hurt us, to insult us, to exalt us, to exhilarate us, to fascinate us, etc. But when sounds and verbal communications are experienced as mere sounds, as the union of sound and emptiness, their power over us dissolves and we experience them with perfect equanimity, and thus without being bent out of shape in any way by them.

The mind of the deity is the union of awareness and emptiness. The experiences of the five sense consciousnesses and of the mental consciousness give rise to a constantly changing kaleidoscope of thoughts, mental afflictions, positive and negative feelings, sensations both felicitous and painful, and subtle dualistic perceptions which have the power, in the absence of the experiential understanding of their emptiness, to involve us in the most outrageous, outlandish, though sometimes very subtle, melodramas of the mind with their consequent suffering. But when the essential emptiness of all of these experiences is recognized, and one ceases to welcome and reject them, they dissolve or are self-liberated in their own place, the space of empty radiant awareness.

All deities share these three aspects of the essential nature-which we also call mahamudra or dzogchen-and all practitioners who practice deity meditation with sufficient diligence and perseverance will come to realize this very same nature-the body, speech, and mind of the deity-in themselves as they become the deity.

At the same time, each deity has its own particular relative blessing. If one meditates on Chenrezig, ultimately one will realize mahamudra or dzogchen, and attain buddhahood, complete enlightenment. But in the short run, one will experience a strengthening of one's loving kindness and compassion. If one meditates on Green Tara, ultimately one will attain enlightenment, but in the short run, one will experience freedom from fear and mental paralysis, the increased ability to accomplish one's objectives, and an increase in active compassion. If one meditates on Manjushri, in the end one will attain enlightenment, but in the short run one will experience an increase in intelligence, insight, and wisdom. If one meditates on the Medicine Buddha, one will eventually attain enlightenment, but in the meantime one will experience an increase in healing powers, both for oneself and others, and a decrease in physical and mental illness and suffering. Whether or not we have a very strong motive to attain buddhahood, we all desire these sorts of relative objectives, so deity meditation provides tremendous incentive for the practice of dharma.

And yet deity meditation is just another version of calm abiding and vipashyana (spiritual insight). When one meditates with concentration on the deity, when one visualizes the form, the attire, the jewelry, the hand-held implements, the throne, the seat, and other attributes of the deity, when one visualizes and meditates on the entourage, the general environment, and the internal mandala of a deity, and when one recites the deity's mantra, one is cultivating calm abiding; and when one realizes that all that one is meditating on is mere empty appearance, one is cultivating spiritual insight. But because meditation on the deity and on the union of the deity and one's own root lama also instantly connects one with the empty clear light nature-which is

the essence of the deity, the guru, and the lineage, as well as being one's own essential nature -the power of this way of cultivating calm abiding to purifying the mind of the practitioner of the mental obscurations blocking his or her spiritual insight is immeasurably greater than that of ordinary tranquility meditation on mundane objects like the breath or a flower or a candle flame. And since the forms upon which one is meditating are mere mental fabrications, their emptiness is more immediately apparent than, say, the emptiness of something like the Jefferson Memorial or the Washington Monument.

This is all possible because of the special quality of the vajrayana, which takes enlightenment as the path, rather than seeing it merely as a goal. Through the three processes of 1) abhisheka (empowerment, initiation), which ripens the mental continuum; 2) oral transmission conferred through the reading of sacred texts, which transmission supports one's practice; and 3) tri-the teachings, explanations, and pointing out instructions, which liberate-one is connected directly to the enlightened state which is uncovered in us through these transmissions of the guru and the lineage. Thereafter, when one practices or merely brings to mind these teachings, transmissions, and empowerments, one is instantly reconnected with that compassionate primordial awareness, and this constant reconnecting then becomes one's path, bringing with it the rapid purification of mental defilements and the rapid accumulation of merit and wisdom. The recognition of this connection is the uncovering of one's own wisdom. If it goes unrecognized, it still exists in the practitioner's mental continuum as a seed, which will gradually ripen according to conditions, principal among which is perseverance in practice.

The teachings on the Medicine Buddha that follow present the stages of practice of a Medicine Buddha sadhana that is commonly practiced in the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism as well as in other lineages. It is not the only Medicine Buddha practice, but it is one that is relatively short and simple and can be practiced easily. In these teachings, Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche elucidates not only the details of this particular practice, but also many of the basic principles of tantric theory and practice in general: the notion of deities and buddha realms, the principles of samayasattva and jnanasatrva, the principles of emanating and gathering, the meaning of mantras, and the use of offerings to cultivate qualities, just to mention a few. For anyone engaged in any vajrayana practice, this teaching is very useful in understanding the foundations of tantric meditation and practice. Indeed, it is a garden of extraordinary elucidations.



Following his teachings on the stages of practice of the Medicine Buddha Sadhana, Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche presents the teachings of the Buddha Shakyamuni on the aspirations of the Medicine Buddha, which are contained in the sutra called *The Twelve Great Aspirations of the Medicine Buddha*.

In these teachings, Rinpoche first explains the twelve great aspirations, including the benefits of hearing, recollecting, and reciting the name of the Medicine Buddha. Some of these aspirations are particular to the Buddhist path, but many of them are the same as those one finds reflected in progressive social and political movements and in the movements for human rights everywhere. These aspirations of the Medicine Buddha, which are recounted by the Buddha Shakyamuni, include amongst others the aspiration that all beings be free of physical defects and

imperfections; that they be free from all illness and harm; that they be free generally of any kind of prejudice directed against them and of the difficulties that arise from such prejudice; that they be free specifically of racial prejudice, racial discrimination, and racial oppression; that they be free of conflict and warfare and from the false views and misunderstandings that lead to conflict and warfare; that they be free of despotic and dictatorial rulers who oppress them with fear, torture, physical punishment, imprisonment, and deceit; that they be free of restrictions on their movements and on the free exercise of their speech; that they be free from hunger and thirst; and that they be free of all forms of poverty and the consequences of poverty. Anyone who feels greatly committed to these values and aspirations will in time find the practice of the Medicine Buddha of great value and consequence. Through perseverant practice, in time, the courage, strength, power, ability, and resources to accomplish such aspirations will arise increasingly in oneself and in others in one's environment. As it is said in the old East Indian proverb:

If you sow a thought, you reap a deed.
If you sow a deed, you reap a habit.
If you sow a habit, you reap a character.
And if you sow a character, you reap a destiny.

In addition, in this section Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche gives a number of other extremely interesting and useful teachings: the meaning of deity in vajrayana Buddhism; the nature of the four maras and the transcendence of obstacles on the path; and the four qualities of a good intention. Rinpoche also describes and explains the mudras or ritual gestures employed in the sadhana.

In the third of these teachings, Thrangu Rinpoche also gives a particularly lucid description of the five wisdoms associated with the five Buddha families, describing them as five aspects of intrinsic awareness or as five aspects of the wisdom of a buddha.



The reader will notice that most of the deities in this particular sadhana are male. One should not conclude therefrom that this is typical of tantric mandalas. There are some mandalas—such as the mandalas of Arya Tara, Vajrayogini, and Chöd— in which the deities are all or nearly all female, others that are balanced, and others that vary slightly more one way or the other.



Readers who would like to find a dharma center in their area where this Medicine Buddha sadhana might be practiced are advised to go to www.kagyu.com and www.kagyu.org and search their lists of satellite centers as a start. By searching the internet for “Medicine Buddha,” one will also find additional listings of such dharma centers and practice groups. Readers are also reminded that all the supplementary information contained in various issues of *Shenpen Osel* referred to in the backnotes of this book can be accessed free of charge at



We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to the great Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, whose extraordinary warmth, compassion, clarity and wisdom fill these pages. To find such a remarkable teacher, and to have the great good fortune to be able to serve him and receive from him such vast and profound teachings is rare indeed. There is not much need to elaborate further on his wonderful qualities and his selfless service to humanity and to other sentient beings, for his reputation now spreads across the face of the earth, as I am sure it also spreads throughout limitless buddha realms.

We would also like to thank the always ever more skillful translator, Lama Yeshe Gyamtso, for his many years of retreat practice in preparation for his present distinguished service as one of the world's foremost translators of the buddhadharma in general and of the teachings of the Kagyu lineage in particular. And especially we would like to thank him for translating the teachings in these pages.

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-Lama Tashi Namgyal