

Ayya Yeshe

*How to Be a Light for Yourself and Others in Challenging Times*

Week One: “Establishing the Basis for Dharma Practice”

September 4, 2017



Hi, I'm Ayya Yeshe. I'm an Australian Buddhist nun and I've been ordained 16 years. I'm the director of Bodhicitta Foundation, a charity for people in the slums of Central India, which has been running for over a decade. I'm also the founding abbess of a monastery in Australia, which we are currently raising funds for, called Khandro Ling Hermitage.

I'm mainly from the Sakya tradition but I was ordained as a fully ordained nun by Thich Nhat Hanh, the Nobel Peace Prize nominee and Vietnamese Zen master. Today I would like to talk about *The Seven Points of Mind Training* by Geshe Chekawa, which is mainly from the Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. It's actually quite a long and involved text but it's a wonderful introduction to Mahayana Buddhism. As we go through the text, I hope that I can make some of this very relevant to people's daily lives. There is something timeless and inspiring about these teachings. We can look at the authentic original texts and then reflect on them and how they make sense in our own lives.

This talk will have four parts. The first part is about developing openness and compassion, and it starts with point one, the preliminaries, which are a basis for dharma practice. Geshe Chekawa prostrates to the buddha of great compassion and says, “First, train in the preliminaries.” The four common foundational teachings of Tibetan Buddhism are the precious human rebirth, death and impermanence, the suffering nature of existence, and cause and effect.

If you think about it, being alive is a great gift. Every day we are alive is a beautiful chance to begin again, to discover something new, and sometimes we remember that we're actually not going to be here forever. I grew up in a very normal town—a country town where there's more sheep than people. I had a very normal life and I just felt that I would be here forever and that nothing would change. Yet when I was 14 my father passed away from cancer; that was a really pivotal moment of my life because I realized that we're not going to be here forever. Suddenly it

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was like a doll's house where the roof had been taken off and the walls had fallen down, and there I was alone in uncertain space with a rug pulled out from under me.

I went into a suicidal depression with a lot of anger and I just started thinking: *What is the meaning of life? If I don't know the meaning of life, what is the point of continuing? How can I overcome this overwhelming pain that I have?* The spiritual path is not just about temporary happiness or a short term, short fix solution. We may come to meditation because we want to deal with stress and we want to feel more connected and more happy and more peaceful—that's totally understandable in the beginning. But if our spiritual practice doesn't embrace both the dark and the light, it's not a complete spiritual practice. So part of the purpose of this text is to take obstacles as the path, to learn to work with the juicy, messy, hard bits of life as well as the joyful, open, inspiring parts of life.

When my father died I just realized that life is uncertain and that we can die at any time—that every day of life left to us is a gift reminding us that we shouldn't live mindlessly. So often people tell us you'll be happy, but that happiness is an idea in the future. From the time we're young people say you'll be happy when you finish school, you'll be happy when you finish university, you'll be happy when you meet the one. You'll be happy when you get a mortgage, when you have kids, or when you get a promotion. You'll be happy finally like you're looking forward to your children leaving home, then you'll be happy when you retire, and then finally, after a while, there's not a lot left to look forward to so we start looking back and we say I was happy then, I was happy then, I would be happy if only. So we're never actually happy. Happiness is an idea in the future. But the fact is the past is gone, it's a memory, and the future has not yet come. The only time we can really be happy is the here and now, and that requires us to come home to our own heart, to come home to our own mind, to embrace the imperfections and the messiness and use it as the impulse for awakening and to grow the roses of insight.

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Thinking about the preciousness of human life is meant to make us develop a sense of gratitude. We always think about what we don't have instead of what we do have. Today have you had enough to eat, do you have a roof over your head? Did someone smile at you? Do you have a friend? Can you read and write your own name? If you have all these things, then chances are you're better off than 50 percent of the world. Human rebirth is a sense to realize that we have so much to be grateful for and that human life is a gift. There are eight conditions, the eight freedoms and the ten endowments in the traditional teachings, which are the conditions that make the spiritual life easier to practice.

To sum them up: Are you born human? Do you have a mind that can comprehend the teachings? Do you have a reasonable amount of health that allows you to do these practices? If you have these conditions, then it's a wonderful chance to practice. Even if you are just starting your practice with those conditions, it's still a great chance to begin. The external conditions that make our spiritual life easier are that the Buddha has appeared, that the teachings are available and that there is sustenance for the four-fold sangha to flourish, which is lay practitioners, male and female, and fully ordained monastics, bhikkhus and bhikkhunis.

Then there is the following understanding that not only am I alive, but I have this great chance to practice. Therefore, resolve with: I'm gonna take things as the path of awakening. The next one is death and impermanence. People say, "Buddhists are so pessimistic. They're always talking about death." But in fact, a person who hasn't understood that their life is finite is a person who is not taking in the essence of every moment. That doesn't mean that you have to go bungee jumping, or that you can be completely irresponsible because you may not be alive tomorrow. There is still something called karma, or cause and effect. It's the middle path between cherishing every moment and also understanding that there are consequences to your actions.

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Happiness and peace have to be qualities that we live in every moment by coming home to our true home. When you're washing the dishes don't just look for the next moment where you don't have to wash the dishes. Enjoy that moment—it won't come again. Why spend it wishing you were somewhere else? Just breathe and enjoy the sensation of washing the dishes. When you're with someone, don't think, *I can't wait until I can go home and be with the person I really love.* That's a moment of your life that won't come again, so why not be open and curious? Open your heart and see what is happening and you may find that you actually are able to hold space for someone in pain and that you're able to help them transform something.

Through being present in your life without an agenda, without constantly manipulating things to be on your terms, you may open your heart, learn a great deal, and be of service to yourself and others. It's a much more joyful way of living. Most of us are living under a constant cloud of over-thinking and we don't have a lot of control over our negative emotions. They totally take us over and we don't have control over the thoughts. What we haven't understood is that we are not our suffering; we have suffering. We are not our thoughts; we have thoughts. There is a basic goodness, a basic interconnectedness, a basic well-being, a basic wealth, that flows through all of life.

If we are not constantly absent dreaming about the past or wishing for the future—neither of which exist in the present moment—we can touch the beauty of the present moment as the miracle of life. You have an appointment with life, but are you turning up? Because happiness can't be in the past or the future, it has to be the open-hearted way in which we embrace this moment, the way in which we apply our awareness to the here and now. So your awareness is not on something else, your awareness is on whatever you're doing in the present moment—that's your meditation. When you drink your tea, you're there with your breath with a peaceful mind

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drinking your tea. When you're listening to someone, you're really listening to them. You're not just waiting for your chance to speak. When you're doing your job, you're just doing your job in that moment with that thing. And if you need to plan for the future you plan for the future, no problem. But you do one thing at a time.

Understanding death is not just about pessimism, it's actually understanding that this is not a dress rehearsal—that this is it. In this way we don't say and do things in a careless or cavalier way. If we have full awareness, we can embrace life and we won't act in a way that we'll regret later. We have awareness and we have a mind of virtue of wanting to benefit others. The time of death is uncertain, but death is certain. No one who has ever lived avoided death, and the only thing that we can carry with us is spiritual realization and good deeds. We arrive naked and alone, we leave naked and alone.

In life we encounter many kinds of unsatisfactoriness and challenges. Birth, old age, sickness, and death. Losing what we have, meeting with unpleasant people. That doesn't mean that all of life is misery, but it means that as long as you have a mind that is uncontrolled, overwhelmed by self-grasping egotism, greed, hatred and delusion, you're not going to be fully happy. When we talk about happiness, we need to ask ourselves: What is a resilient, deep, and profound kind of happiness based on compassion? What is a short-term excitement that is not that is not lasting? In Buddhism, we are trying to seek the long-term happiness that is a benefit to ourselves and others.

It's a kind of equanimity, a kind of resilience, a kind of peace that can sit with good times and bad times. That is a true kind of peace. It's not just the well-being we feel when everything is going the way we want it to go, but it's a kind of unshakeable peace that can embrace difficulty. If you look at nature you don't see the trees crying when the leaves are falling. You see the birds

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joyfully and bravely diving into the wind. You just see that everything is part of the cycle of life and that we are no different from that, but that we always try to hold on when we need to let go. And sometimes we let go when it's not the time to let go. We need to not worry so much but instead to just embrace life as it's happening in the present moment.

In Buddhism we don't say “soul” or “self” we say “mindstream,” because our mind is like a river that is constantly changing. We are not the same person we were when we were five years old or 20 years old. We're always changing, and yet there is continuity. We can remember who we were, what we did, what our experience was, but you can never put your foot on the same river twice, as soon as you touch it it is already passed on in time. The nature of mind is both clear knowing in the sense that it can know or cognize things that arise, abide, and dissolve due to causes and conditions that make them appear—but there is also this dreamlike illusory nature that we call emptiness. Emptiness doesn't mean nothing, but it means nothing has a permanent and lasting independent nature.

Because everything we experience is already passed on and is always changing, it's also dreamlike. This union of clarity and emptiness is how we speak of the mind and the mindstream. The mind is the knower for this. Our nature is boundless. The sky is not disturbed by the clouds, but we just need to recognize. We are not the clouds, we are the big blue—boundless and beyond death. We need to return to our true home. Death reminds us to simplify and return to what is essential.

The final of the four preliminaries is cause and effect, or karma. We hear it very often now in mainstream shows and TV. We say, “It's your karma,” or, “It must be my karma.” It's almost lost its meaning. Karma just means “action” or “cause and effect.” Karma should not mean a way that you judge others.

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To understand karma, you need to understand that everybody is a result of cultural, social, and economic conditions. If you change their cultural, social, and economic conditions, then they can also change. If you water the seeds of goodness in someone they can change and awaken; you can do that for yourself, too. What we need to do is examine how things are arising and how we can be a part of changing that. But karma should never be an excuse for us to accept dysfunction or be apathetic.

There is a fear in us that we should make profit and we should think of ourselves, but mostly that kind of constricted, egotistical, self-obsessed thinking doesn't lead to happiness. It's based on fear. It's constricted, narrow, and stuffy. Whereas a more bodhisattva-like, or compassionate, attitude is to be a spiritual warrior who is moved by compassion to work to free all beings from suffering and become a fully awakened being. So a more bodhisattva-like attitude to life is to share what you have, to share your wealth, to share your skills, and to benefit others. There was a wonderful psychotherapist called Viktor Frankl who was in Auschwitz. He said the people who survived Auschwitz, apart from those who obviously didn't have a choice about it, were people who had a reason to live. As soon as they lost their meaning they died. Frankl said, don't just aim for happiness or success, aim for meaning. Aim to follow your conscience, to find your higher calling, and if you do that happiness and success will automatically come.

Whatever we have is better if we share it. If we get everything we want at the expense of compassion and the expense of others in the planet, are we really winning? Are we really successful? Are we really happy? So many of us have followed these materialistic aims in life and it has left us feeling very empty. I used to work for an insurance company and my grandfather said, "That's a good company. You can stay with them for life." But I was so bored and unhappy because I wasn't living what I found to be my deepest values, whereas as a

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Buddhist nun, I'm making less money than someone on welfare living in an Indian slum for a decade and I have very few financial resources, but I feel completely satisfied and fulfilled with life.

When you open to life and accept all its messiness, change, and imperfection, then you start to get curious and you open up. When you open to the truth of suffering and impermanence and the precious human rebirth, you're also opening your heart to create more room for freedom to come in. Sometimes we think that the spiritual path is like material life—that the more we get, the better it will be. But in fact the spiritual path is about letting go. It's about emptying out. It's about returning to the present moment with mindfulness, following your breath, and not allowing your negative emotions to completely overwhelm you but just notice: *There is a thought, it arises, it abides, it dissolves*. Return back to the breath in meditation for 15 or 20 minutes a day and then try to maintain mindful awareness throughout the day. This way we empty out the junk and we start to have a sense of curiosity, joy, resilience, peace, and well-being, because we're not carried away by the past or longing for the future. Whatever may arise, pleasant or unpleasant, simply arises.

We start to learn and we start to transform. If you hold tight onto your own happiness and resources or your own pain, it just smothers the joy of life. It's very constricting. So as we go further into this text, it talks about *tonglen* [a meditation on sending happiness to others and taking on their suffering]. This means exchanging a constricted, self-obsessed, ego-driven view of life for a more open and compassionate, connected view of life. If you wish others well, you're moved by the beauty and empathy that arises and it leads to wonderful insights, action, and resilience. This is how we start to practice and open to wisdom.