Chapter 6 Investigating the Teachings

Before a wise person buys a needed but costly item, he thoroughly investigates the quality of the product. Similarly, if we are to invest our time and energy in practicing a path, it is important to investigate the teachings that explain this path and how to practice it. In this chapter, we examine the factors that make a teaching reliable. Being able to trace a teaching back to the Buddha is a key element in this, so we must know the criteria to do that, especially regarding teachings that have appeared many centuries after the Buddha.

Once we have found reliable teachings, our task is to understand them correctly. It is important to discern the intended purposes of certain statements and the points of particular stories in order to avoid reaching the wrong conclusion. To do this entails taking cultural factors into consideration.

Since the Buddha's teachings are now spreading in new locations and interacting with unfamiliar cultures, the question arises, "Is it desirable or possible to change the Dharma teachings?" To answer this, it is essential to be able to differentiate the actual Dharma from its cultural forms and expressions. If we change the teachings of the path, we will not reach the goal of the path—nirvāṇa. If we do not alter external forms, we may spend a lot of time trying to mimic people from another culture without transforming our minds in any meaningful way.

Once we become clear on the path and the goal, we have to set about creating the causes necessary to attain full awakening by practicing the path. Without creating the causes capable of producing a certain result, that result will not come about, so we must be practical and realistic. If we wait until every one of our questions has been answered to our satisfaction, we will miss out on engaging in genuine spiritual practice.

The Kālāmas' Experience

The Kālāma Sutta in the Pāli canon tells the story of the Kālāma people from Kesaputta, who were confused by the stream of religious teachers visiting their place, each espousing his own doctrine and deprecating those of others. At the outset of the sutta, the Kālāmas are not the Buddha's disciples. Hearing of his qualities, they seek his guidance about how to determine which teachers speak the truth and which are mistaken.

Knowing the Kālāmas are reasonable and sensible people, the Buddha encourages them to investigate the various teachings they hear and not simply accept them because of the flimsy reasons that people too often give for their beliefs. The Buddha does not recommend that the Kālāmas discard statements because they do not understand them; he encourages them to test assertions and see if assertions affirm what they know is true and beneficial from their own experience.

Accepting a teaching simply because it was spoken a long time ago and is part of a lengthy tradition is not wise. However, rejecting old beliefs simply because they don't agree with our present opinions isn't wise either. Remaining open and continuing to examine is judicious. It is our responsibility to use our intelligence to question and test a teaching before accepting it. Having done that, our knowledge will be firm because it will be based on firsthand experience or correct reasoning.

Reliable Teachings

Whatever Buddhist teaching we listen to, study, or practice should be authentic. For centuries people like us have learned and practiced the Buddha's teachings,

thereby transforming their minds and hearts and attaining higher spiritual levels, including buddhahood itself. We can be confident that if we learn and practice these teachings correctly, we too can attain the same results as the past great masters did. To ensure that a teaching is effective and reliable—not a recent, untested invention of an unenlightened person—we should be able to trace its roots to the Buddha himself. Three criteria help us to evaluate a teaching and gain a clearer idea whether it is authentic.

First, teachings given by the fully awakened Buddha himself can be accepted as reliable. To validate commentaries and teachings by masters of subsequent generations, we investigate if their meanings accord with what the Buddha taught.

Second, a teaching subjected to and affirmed by logical scrutiny of the great Buddhist sages can be accepted as authentic. These sages were not intellectuals who simply discussed the teachings without practicing themselves. Great sages such as Āryadeva, Candrakīrti, and Śāntideva were accomplished practitioners who sincerely put the teachings into practice and transformed their minds.

Third, a teaching practiced and realised by highly realised yogis and yoginīs is authentic. These great practitioners sincerely practiced the Buddha's teachings, internalised their meaning and gained significant spiritual realisations. This demonstrates that the teachings they practiced are reliable.

We should avoid disparaging teachings that we disagree with or not fully understand by declaring, "The Buddha didn't teach this." Eg, what is to be gained by saying, "The Buddha didn't teach rebirth" simply because the idea of rebirth makes us uncomfortable or does not immediately make sense to us? It is best to remain neutral toward such teachings and put them aside for the time being.

Why, then, was this instruction given to that disciple? Under those particular circumstances, that individual was ripe and able to benefit from hearing it. Instead of generating the wrong view mistaking blank-minded meditation for meditation on emptiness, this person's unique mental state made him an appropriate pupil to hear that explanation and understand the correct view.

Some statements in sūtras or Indian treatises are explained differently in each of the four philosophical schools, and there are levels of profundity within the sūtra and tantra systems. The Buddha taught certain points with skilful means to benefit a particular type of disciple and gradually lead her to the final, correct view. Thus we accept differing statements in the scriptures and differing interpretations of some statements as indicative of the Buddha's skilful means. However, we should not take this to an extreme and think that the Buddha was so vague that anyone can interpret his statements in any way that she likes! Rather, one statement may have many explicit and implicit meanings that can be drawn out in various ways. In the highest yoga tantra specifically, a phrase may be interpreted in four ways—in accord with its literal meaning, general meaning, hidden meaning, and final meaning. It may also be interpreted in six modes: interpretable and definitive, implied meaning and non-implied (direct) meaning, literal and nonliteral. Here interpretable and definitive do not mean the same as in the sūtra context.

REFLECTION

Three criteria can enable us to discern a particular teaching as reliable:

1. It was given by the fully awakened Buddha himself.
2. It has been subjected to and affirmed by the logical scrutiny of the great Buddhist sages.
3. It has been practiced and realised by the great mahāsiddhas.

Treasure Teachings and Pure Vision Teachings

In Tibetan Buddhism, in addition to teachings spoken by the Buddha in sūtras and by the great masters in their writings, there are "treasure" teachings (**terma** or tercho) and other teachings that arise from pure visions. How are these traced back to the Buddha, and what is the process for ascertaining their validity?

Termas are teachings discovered centuries after their composition either concealed somewhere in the environment or revealed as visionary teachings. These were hidden as termas because they were not suitable for the practitioners at the time of the initial guru but would benefit practitioners at the time of the **terton**, the later practitioner who discovers them. When the terma is hidden, the guru who hides it often prophesies where, when, and by whom it will later be discovered.

There are two main kinds of termas: earth treasures and mind treasures. Earth treasures are objects such as texts and ritual implements that are discovered in nature—in rocks, mountains, or trees—or in a temple or stūpa. Earth termas are not ordinary books but are often written in another script or language. Sometimes they contain symbols that trigger the terton to recall a teaching, which he then writes down. Mind treasures are found in space—that is, they appear to the mind of the terton. Guru Padmasambhava, the most prolific creator of termas, or another guru placed them in the mindstream of the terton, who experiences them in meditation and then writes the teaching down from memory. Sometimes the terton himself holds the teaching in his mindstream and reveals it in a future life.

A treasure teaching enhances the teachings the Buddha already gave. In content and purpose, it is in line with the teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha contained in the sūtras and tantras. In this way it is traceable to the Buddha.

In the Tibetan Buddhist community, some treasure discoveries are considered false and others authentic, indicating that some claims may be forged or simply erroneous. There is not an appointed committee or person who is responsible for checking the accuracy of termas. Rather, a prominent and authoritative master that is well known in the Tibetan community usually comments on a terma. He and others take into consideration three factors: whether the terton and/or the terma were prophesied by the Buddha or another lineage master, chiefly Padmasambhava; how this treasure teaching compares with those well-known, authentic treasure teachings discovered in the past; and the characteristics of the person who claims to be the treasure discoverer.

In most cases, an authentic treasure discoverer conceals a new treasure teaching for some years while he or she practices it to determine whether it is reliable. That person's teacher also practices and evaluates the teaching. Sometimes an explicit statement in the terma says that the terton will encounter a specific, reliable student to whom he should first give this teaching. This student is called the "owner of the teaching," and the discoverer may wait to see if this student appears. As I understand it, when Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche experienced something akin to intuition in which a teaching appeared in his mind, he explained this to his teacher Khyentse Chokyi Lodro. Then both of them would practice this teaching and, if they both gained some deeper experience, they considered it authentic.

There are other teachings that derive from a pure vision appearing in the mind of a realised master in deep meditation. Unlike termas, they are not transmitted by mind from Padmasambhava. Rather the pure vision of the deity appears directly to the practitioner. Here the deity who appears is in fact a buddha. As with termas,

the teachings given in a pure vision should accord with original teachings traceable to the Buddha. If the deity in the vision taught that an inherently existent soul existed, that clearly would not be an authentic pure-vision teaching!

The Fifth Dalai Lama had visions of several deities, and thus certain initiation lineages trace back to him. He practiced the teachings from his pure visions and had good results. Later masters also did this, with similar results. The Fifth Dalai Lama was a good monk, an excellent scholar, and an outstanding practitioner. He had no reason to lie.

I received some of the initiations coming from the pure vision of the Fifth Dalai Lama from my teacher Takdrak Rinpoche when I was around ten or eleven years old. At that time, I wasn't very interested in them, although I did have some auspicious dreams during that time. Now when I do retreat on the Fifth Dalai Lama's pure visions here in Dharamsala, some indications of success appear during each retreat. They may not be obvious signs, but still they come, so these plus my experience in practicing these teachings leads me to believe they are authentic. The Second Dalai Lama also had many pure visions, as did the First Dalai Lama, although he kept them concealed.

Each Tibetan Buddhist tradition has guru-yoga meditations centred on prominent lineage holders or founders of that lineage. For Nyingma, it is Padmasambhava; for Kagyu, Milarepa; for Geluk, Tsongkhapa; and for Sakya, the five founders of the Sakya order (Sachen Kunga Nyingpo, Sonam Tsemo, Jetsun Drakpa Gyaltsen, Sakya Paṇḍita, and Chogyal Phakpa). We may wonder: Since these masters were later historical figures, the guru-yoga practices centred on them were written long after the Buddha lived. How do we know that these practices are valid?

Upon examination, we see that these guru-yoga sadhanas (ritual texts) contain the important elements of any tantric practice: taking refuge and generating bodhicitta, the seven-limb prayer, requesting inspiration, dissolution of the guru into the meditator, and meditation on emptiness. Although the central figure varies—instead of being a deity it is now a lineage lama—the practice is still authentic because it follows the basic meditation procedures for this type of practice.

Exaggerated Statements?

Sometimes we encounter statements in the sūtras or commentaries that appear exaggerated, and we doubt whether we should take them literally. Using the criteria mentioned above as well as our common sense, we can evaluate whether they are accurate if understood literally.

For example, statements in some scriptures say that by reciting a particular mantra once, one will never be born in an unfortunate realm or one will attain awakening easily. If such statements were literally true, there would have been no need for the Buddha to teach us to avoid destructive actions and create constructive ones. If we could be reborn in a pure land by reciting a few mantras, why would the Buddha spend so much time teaching the importance of counteracting ignorance and afflictions by applying the antidotes to them? If we could gain realisations simply by reciting mantras, the Buddha would not have taught the three higher trainings and the cultivation of method and wisdom. We can see that such statements are not consistent with the Buddha's teachings in other scriptures. Therefore we cannot take these statements literally. Reciting mantras must be conjoined with other virtuous practices to bring the desired results. So why does the

scripture say this? In part, the benefits of reciting a mantra were extolled to inspire certain people who are embarking on the practice.

In addition, the results of reciting a mantra differ according to the person doing it and how it is done. A constructive action done by a person adhering to Buddhist precepts is far more powerful than the same action done by one not living within the precepts. The potency of mantra recitation done by a person contemplating the emptiness of the mantra, reciting it with a bodhicitta motivation, or visualising sending out emanations to benefit sentient beings is much more powerful than the same recitation by someone whose mind is distracted. The power of the mantra does not operate independent of these other conditions.

On the flip side of these benefits, some scriptures state, for example, that we will be reborn in the hell realm for the same number of eons as the number of moments we are angry with our spiritual master; that one moment of anger destroys the merit of generosity and other practices accumulated over one eon; or that anger toward a bodhisattva leads to experiencing unfortunate rebirths and great suffering for eons.

Some people may think that the Buddha made such statements to instil fear in us so that we will behave ethically. This is not the case. The Buddha had no reason to threaten us with punishment: the law of karma and its effects is not a system of punishment and reward. Rather, with compassion the Buddha was reminding us that a small action can bring a large result, just as in the physical world a tiny seed can grow into a huge tree. Such seemingly exaggerated statements aren't only about the bad effects of small unwholesome actions. They are also found on the positive side; great beneficial results may come about by doing small constructive actions. For example, it is said that if a person shoots a sinister look to a bodhisattva, the karmic impact is like gouging out the eyes of all sentient beings. However, it is also said that if we pay respect to or venerate a bodhisattva for even one moment, we accumulate merit as vast as the universe. One text says that even if an enraged person glances at the image of the Buddha, he accumulates merit by the power of having contact with an image representing awakening. As a result of this, he will be able to see ten million buddhas in the future. But remember, glancing at a Buddha statue alone will not yield the result of seeing ten million buddhas. We also need to purify our minds, create merit, generate bodhicitta, and understand emptiness.

In statements about the effects of our interactions with buddhas, bodhisattvas, and their images, the heaviness of the karma is primarily due to what is called the "power of the object." That is, buddhas and bodhisattva are remarkable beings who have accumulated merit for countless eons and have continually engaged in benefiting sentient beings. Venerating such beings, making offerings to them, and assisting them in their various works create powerful karma because, being weighty in virtue, holy beings are powerful objects. Similarly, interfering with their good deeds or scorning them leaves heavy harmful latencies in our mind.

Whether our actions regarding holy objects have the potency to bring strong or weak effects also depends on the context of the action. If a person who is not a bodhisattva gets angry at a bodhisattva for whom she usually holds great admiration. Her anger is not rage; rather she lost her temper over a small thing. If she immediately regains mindfulness and regrets her anger, I don't think she will experience suffering for countless eons. However, another person has no regard for bod-

hisattvas in general and is antagonistic toward one in particular. If he gets very angry toward that bodhisattva, the harsh consequences mentioned above may apply.

Results arise in dependence upon a multiplicity of causes and conditions, so scriptural statements must be understood in that light. The intensity of our intention, whether getting angry or generating compassion, makes a big difference in the strength of the result. Also, if a person performs an action repetitively—be it constructive or destructive—the result will be heavier. Another factor affecting the heaviness is whether a counterforce is present: if we purify destructive actions, their effects will be lighter, whereas generating anger or wrong views hinders the ripening of our constructive karma. The strength of the regret and the strength of the wrong views will also affect the heaviness of the karma.

In short, many factors are involved in the weight of a karma. In Blaze of Reasoning by Bhāvaviveka and in the Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path by Tsongkhapa, it is said that the intricacies of karma are very profound. How specific actions bring specific results is a very obscure phenomenon that only omniscient buddhas know with complete accuracy.

If we do not feel comfortable believing some of the scriptural statements about karma and its results, we can leave them aside. No one is forcing us to believe what the Buddha said or to become a Buddhist. In matters of religion, a great diversity of beliefs is natural. While everyone—animals and human beings alike—agrees that drinking water is necessary, we disagree on what food is delicious. Similarly, although the search for meaning in life is shared, we may differ regarding religious beliefs. There is room for a variety of views.

REFLECTION

1. Are there scriptural statements that you feel uncomfortable with or doubtful toward? If so, what are they?
2. Are there other scriptures that either reinforce, contradict, or give another interpretation of the meaning of that statement? How does that change your thought?
3. Was religion used as a tool of coercion or intimidation when you were a child? If so, could that experience now affect your perspective on Buddhist scripture?

Correctly Understanding the Point

The meaning of certain stories found in Dharma texts is not always obvious, especially since they were told for a specific purpose and are related to the author's cultural context. A few examples will illustrate this.

There is a story of the Buddha in his previous life giving away his wife and children as an act of generosity. This seems to contradict not only modern values of gender equality but also the ancient principle of caring for one's family.

We may be confused or even incensed by the values and assumptions underlying this story. It is helpful to step back and ask ourselves what Dharma meaning is being expressed in the story. Most people cherish their family more than anything else. Attachment to our loved ones is often so strong that the thought of being separated from them brings us great anguish. That someone was willing to offer what they cherish most testifies to the depth of that person's faith and veneration for the Three Jewels. He is willing to separate from his most cherished objects to create merit. This story also illustrates that when attachment has been conquered, the mind does not cling even to those we cherish most. The mind is so free that we are not overwhelmed with distress when separated from our dear ones.

We don't need to agree with the social values of an ancient culture in order to learn a valuable point from an ancient story. While in ancient times—and even today—a wife and children being a man's property was acceptable to Indian sensibil-

ities, clearly it is not acceptable now in other countries. We can maintain our contemporary social values and still appreciate the Dharma meaning of a story.

Aśvaghoṣa, a great Indian sage of the first century, wrote the *Acts of the Buddha* in which he related the Buddha's deeds when he was a bodhisattva. One of these was the well-known story about the Buddha offering his body to a starving tigress so she could feed her cubs. After writing this, Aśvaghoṣa had a strong aspiration to practice just as the Buddha did, so when he encountered a starving tigress one day, in a pure act of generosity, not expecting anything in return, he gave the tigress his body. The moment he did this, he composed a prayer of seventy verses about the bodhisattva practice, using his own blood as ink. This prayer is really wonderful, but as no one was there when he did this, I'm not sure where the oral transmission of the prayer came from?

Some people may initially be horrified by the idea of feeding their body to a tiger and wonder why Buddhists would glorify such a suicidal act. "Isn't it better to stay alive and work for the welfare of human beings rather than feed our body to an animal?" they ask. The purpose of this story is to emphasise the depth of bodhisattvas' compassion: to benefit others, they are willing to give even their body and life without any attachment. This illustrates the strength of compassion we want to cultivate as aspiring bodhisattvas. Although having no attachment to our body may seem almost impossible at our current level, by training our mind in non-attachment and compassion we will gradually be able to cultivate the attitude that can give our body and life as easily as giving an apple to someone.

Two or three centuries ago, a great teacher and sincere practitioner named Togyen Lama Rinpoche lived in Tibet. He had a small clay image of Tsongkhapa on his carefully tended altar. One day, due to Togyen Lama's genuine practice and heartfelt aspirational prayers, that image of Tsongkhapa actually spoke and gave teachings to him. This came about not from the side of the statue, but mainly due to Togyen Lama's excellent practice. Due to his spiritual experiences and confidence in Tsongkhapa, this clay image became the real Tsongkhapa and spoke to him. However, for ordinary people who lack that kind of spiritual experience and faith, the statue just looked like clay.

These are just a few examples. When we read stories in texts it is helpful to reflect on them in order to discern the meaning the author intended; we can ignore the social values or other elements of the story that don't make sense to people in our day and age or in our culture. It's also good to remember that not all aspects of an analogy apply to the point being established. Many stories or analogies are useful in one area but cannot be generalised to all situations. When doubts remain, it is helpful to discuss the meaning with Dharma friends or ask our teacher so we will understand teachings, stories, and analogies in the way that they are intended.

REFLECTION

1. Recall a story you have heard or read in a Dharma teaching that left you feeling confused, disturbed, or irritated.
2. Realising that the story is from another culture that had different social values than you do now, set the details of the story aside and ask yourself, "What is the point of this story?"
3. Consider how that point relates to your Dharma practice.

Can the Dharma Change?

Some people ask if the Buddha's teachings can be changed in order to make them more relevant to our historical period. Although they want to make the Dharma more understandable to others, they are concerned that altering the teachings would impact their authenticity and efficacy. This question requires careful thought.

It's important to differentiate between the essence of the Buddha's teachings—the determination to be free, bodhicitta, and the correct view of reality—and the external forms of Buddhism, such as the colour and style of monastic robes, the design of the altar, the types of offerings that are made, and the language and melody of chants. External forms have changed each time Buddhism has spread to a different place, and this does not affect the essence of the Buddha's message. However, changing the teachings of the Buddha that describe duḥkha, its origin, its cessation, and the path to nirvāṇa would alter the fundamental perspective and principles of the Buddhadharma, making it no longer the teachings of the Buddha.

Regarding the development of Buddhist thought in ancient India and in the classical period in Tibet, many of the debates in the texts centre on issues in epistemology, cognitive processes, and the relationship between body and mind that were important to people at that time and place. In ancient India, Buddhist thinkers had to respond to philosophical claims made by non-Buddhist Indian schools. While some of those debates may, upon first glance, not seem important to us, if we look closely we may see that some versions of those views might exist today. In that case, studying their refutations could help us when speaking with our contemporaries who assert the existence of a universal mind, an absolute creator, predetermination, etc. Understanding the reasons disproving the theses of non-Buddhists may also help us dispel similar kinds of beliefs that we may have.

In Tibet, many of the debates centre around the two truths: what they are and how they relate to each other. Here Buddhists debate with each other—not with non-Buddhists—in order to distinguish the Middle Way view from views of nihilism and absolutism. Some of the views expressed by earlier Tibetan Buddhists are held by people today, so studying the pros and cons of these various views can be relevant to our practice.

In ancient times, people lacked a sophisticated understanding of the brain and neural processes and of their role in perception, emotions, and other cognitive processes. Since now we have a much better scientific understanding of the brain and its role in our experiences, it would be helpful to bring that knowledge into Buddhist thinking. Buddhist dialogue with science raises a number of other issues that need to be discussed and debated—issues that would not have occurred to people in ancient India or in classical Tibet. Previously people naturally accepted that mind and body were different entities; these days they don't, so Buddhists need to prove the existence of the mind, its difference from the brain, and the relation of the two. The great Buddhist debaters of the past were not concerned with the issue of predetermination and free will, but when Buddhism enters into cultures influenced by theistic religions, those topics become crucial. In these and other such areas, Buddhists need to learn and contemplate the views of scientists and people of other religions and know how to apply Buddhist principles to them and to respond with wisdom. There is much room for us to grow in these areas.

However, with respect to the teachings on afflictions and how they cause suffering, sentient beings today have the same kind of afflictions as they did thousands of years ago. The specific objects of attachment and anger may change in different times: in ancient times human beings weren't attached to their smartphones and didn't become angry when their computers or cars broke down. However, the general objects of attachment and anger are still very much the same—whatever gives us happiness or interferes with that happiness. Furthermore, the processes of getting angry by exaggerating the negative aspect of someone and of subduing anger

by means of applying counterforces are the same now as before. The antidotes to individual afflictions such as anger and clinging attachment remain as relevant today as they were then.

It is feasible that after several hundred thousand years, our brain may change through an evolutionary process to the point where even the shape of our head or the functioning of our nervous system will be radically different. In those cases, it is conceivable that sentient beings' preoccupations and ways of thinking may change. However, as far as the problem of self-grasping is concerned, I don't think it will change. Since this root of our suffering will not change, neither will its antidote—the wisdom realising emptiness. As far as the view of emptiness is concerned, it remains relevant at the beginning, the middle, and the end of our practice, in all historical periods, in all places, and for all sentient beings.

When adopting new cultural forms, we must ensure that we neither intentionally nor inadvertently discard or change vital teachings. Should that happen, the liberation and awakening of future generations would be rendered impossible. Thoughtfulness, care, and slow change are preferable to a rush to make Buddhism more attractive to the present public.

Being Practical

Researching teachers and teachings before making a commitment is a good idea. However, sometimes we go too far and think that all our doubts must be resolved and questions answered before we engage in practicing the path to freedom. One sūtra (MN 63) tells the story of Bhikkhu Mālunkyāputta, who has a surge of doubt because the Buddha did not respond to his questions: Is the world eternal or not eternal? Is the world finite or infinite? Is the soul the same as the body or are they different? After death, does a Tathāgata exist, not exist, both, or neither? In his confusion, Mālunkyāputta thinks that he cannot practice the Dharma unless those pressing issues are resolved, and so he approaches the Buddha.

To instruct his disciple, the Buddha uses the simile of a man shot by an arrow. Suppose someone is wounded by a poisonous arrow and taken to the doctor. The wounded man arrives at the clinic, in pain and bleeding profusely, but rather than letting the doctor treat him, he insists on first knowing the social class of the person who shot the arrow, the name and clan of that person, his height and complexion, where he lived, and the type of bow, shaft, feathers, sinews, and arrow that were used. Clearly he would die before all his questions were answered. And even if he were successful in obtaining that information, it would not stop the bleeding nor extend his life. Similarly, if we think, "I will not practice the Dharma until all my questions are answered and doubts resolved," this life will end and no practice will have been done.

For that reason, the Buddha told Mālunkyāputta that he teaches, "**This is dukkha, this is the origin of dukkha, this is the cessation of dukkha, this is the way leading to the cessation of dukkha.**" The Buddha teaches the four truths because they are beneficial to learn, they will help people to live the holy life, and they lead to disenchantment with cyclic existence, the giving up of sensual craving, cessation of dukkha, peace in the mind, direct knowledge of the way things are, and nibbāna. He leaves other topics aside because learning them is not necessary or conducive for this purpose. Whether the world is eternal or not has no relevance to the important task of eliminating afflictions and ceasing saṃsāra. The Buddha recommends that Mālunkyāputta leave aside his questions and focus on

the path that leads to liberation. In that way, Mālunkyāputta will not waste time on senseless doubts.

We should focus on what is important and not be distracted by pointless speculation. If we do not instantly understand a Dharma topic, we can temporarily put it aside and focus on those Dharma topics that help us here and now. Later on we can return to those other topics. Not all our questions can or will be answered at once. Let's be practical and remove that poisonous arrow of the afflictions before it takes our life.

In this chapter, we have learned the criteria to discern reliable teachings. Now we must study those teachings and understand them as they are meant to be understood. This may entail looking beyond cultural overlays and detecting the point of a story or analogy. To attain the goals of liberation and awakening, we must follow the path as the Buddha taught it, without altering it to suit our fancies and predilections. While the outer "packaging" of the teachings—the cultural forms in which they exist—may be changed, we must take care not to change the essential teachings just because they don't agree with our opinions. The challenge is to differentiate between packaging and essence. Great skill is needed to do this.

Having reached the point where we are ready to engage in serious study and practice of the Buddha's teachings, let's not be waylaid by doubts. Instead, let's approach the teachings with curiosity, sincerity, and intelligence.