*Dedicated to the memory of Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche's father,*
*Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, the inspiration to us all.*

# OVERVIEW

MEDICINE AND COMPASSION is a celebration of the great qualities of compassion. Due to the inevitability of suffering, dedicating oneself to trying to increase compassion for others is a noble pursuit. The book, however, goes far beyond just encouraging people to be more compassionate, exploring the origin of compassion and the insights that can allow one to increase one's capacity for compassion. These insights explore the basic nature of our consciousness and its relationship to our outer environment, and this subtle interplay between our perception and what we perceive can seem quite profound and difficult to understand at first. The purpose of this study guide is to help the reader follow the track of the main insights in the book.

THE STUDY GUIDE can also serve as a basis for groups of people who wish to study Medicine and Compassion, and meet to discuss what they have learned. Although the insights that Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche presents are based on the teachings of the Buddha twenty-five hundred years ago, it's not necessary to become a Buddhist in order to benefit from what is being taught. In fact, the Buddha himself did not encourage his own followers to simply adopt what he was saying, but to question it, and try to prove to themselves whether it was valid or not. As we study the book, we should try to maintain an open mind, and instead of just saying, "This doesn't make any sense to me," to adopt the attitude, "I wonder if this could be true or not?" If it seems true, then one can implement the recommendations with confidence. If it doesn't seem true, then what would be the benefit of trying to practice something that didn't seem to be true?

# CHAPTER 1: HUMAN NATURE

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche comes from a country that experienced almost no technological development prior to having been invaded by the Chinese. There were no cars, no telephones, no electricity, no airplanes. People lived mainly as they had for over a thousand years. The inventions of the modern world would seem like magic to someone from that older culture, seeing human beings fly through the air, zoom along the ground in automobiles, or communicate instantly across vast distances.

Rinpoche points this out as an example of the capacity of the human mind to invent technological solutions. However, this inventiveness has gone both ways—the world benefits immensely from an easier way of life, but also faces damage from pollution, and from the destructiveness of war. The human mind has been behind both of these tendencies. Good and evil tendencies co-exist in our consciousness, and he feels that it is worth exploring our basic nature, to see whether the good qualities can be expanded, and the negative qualities could be purified.

Rinpoche's point of view is that the actual nature of our mind is an intrinsic goodness that is often obscured by our habits of thinking. Some of us have the habit of being selfish, or aggressive, and some of us are kind and caring. The issue of our basic nature—whether basically flawed, as in some traditions, or basically pure and compassionate as in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition—has been an age-old question for philosophers and theologians. Why does a good God allow evil to happen? Do human beings naturally compete for resources and power? From where does compassion and altruistic behavior arise?

In Buddhist philosophy, we are said to have a core nature of compassion, something that is inseparable from our basic consciousness. He points out that every human being, and even aggressive animals have some seed of compassion. This seed of compassion is an inextricable part of our consciousness, and can't be separated, just as we can't separate water from the quality of feeling wet. If this postulation is true, then increasing our capacity for compassion is not a matter of instilling more compassion, but stripping away the habits of thinking that prevent us from accessing our inner compassion.

If we would like to improve our capacity for compassion, there are few institutions in the West that can provide that kind of training. As Rinpoche points out, "there are a lot of facilities where younger human beings can go to develop their intelligence," but "there are fewer facilities set up to promote human compassion." We don't even know what to picture when we try to picture an institution set up to promote compassion. Rinpoche may be thinking of the more than 6,000 Tibetan Buddhist monasteries that thrived in Tibet for 1000 years, prior to the Chinese takeover of that country in 1950. The main purpose of the training provided in Tibetan monasteries was the cultivation of compassion and wisdom, to an extraordinary degree.

Compassion can be defined as the desire to ease suffering in others. Right now our compassion is often unstable—sometimes we have it and sometimes we don't. When we do have it, we often limit it to people we know, or can relate to in some way. We find it very difficult to show compassion to people we don't care about, or who have actually tried to harm us. Although having this type of compassion could have great benefit, such compassion does not simply arise by thinking about it. Our habits are too deeply ingrained to go away by themselves without applying some effort.

The special training that we need involves coming to recognize that compassion is our basic nature, quality that Rinpoche terms "emptiness suffused with compassion," a seemingly enigmatic term that ends up having an extremely profound meaning. In the rest of the book, he will try to make clear what that term means.

In order to begin training in compassion, we need to bring to mind a conscious desire to benefit others, a feeling of benevolence towards others. With that important goal in mind we can pursue the step-by-step training that can make our compassion more stable, vast, and effortless.

TO CONTEMPLATE:
Is our basic nature compassionate or not?
Can it be modified by training?

## CHAPTER 2: THE CAUSES OF SUFFERING

If compassion is the desire to relieve suffering in others, then it is important to try to understand the causes of suffering. In order to cure a disease, we need to know the cause, and apply a remedy that can get rid of whatever is causing the illness.

Some causes of suffering are built into our human existence. It is painful to pass through the birth canal; as we age we experience increasing aches, and pains, and more limited capabilities. Illness is a constant threat and can cause a great deal of suffering, and at some point we know that we must face our own death. These kinds of suffering are built into our lives.

In addition to this more overt type of suffering is a more subtle form of vague discontent that is almost always with us, a feeling that everything is not as good as it could be, that we hope things could be better. This is usually accompanied by the fear that something bad could happen at any moment. As a result of this undercurrent of hope and fear, we rarely feel completely content, which is a more subtle form of suffering.

At this point, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche introduces the idea that this vague discontent—and indeed all our suffering—is based on ignorance. Although he doesn't explain it at this point, he is talking about the fact that we don't recognize the true nature of our mind, a quality that is not based on a concept, or a theory of how we can be, but the way in which our consciousness actually exists. "Ignorance," as used in this context does not refer to a lack of education, but to a deeper sense of "not knowing our true nature." We are ignorant of how our mind actually works, because no one has pointed it out to us before.



In this chapter Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche makes one of the most powerful assertions of the whole book, a theme he returns to over and over again: "With diseases, some can be cured and some not. However, feeling emotionally ill at ease can always be cured if we know the right methods and apply them intelligently."

It could be said that the entire book is about knowing the right methods and applying them intelligently. He lets us know that he has laid out the central theme of the book, and admits that it "may sound funny to you." He states: "Ignorance is the root cause of physical disease and mental problems." Knowing that this may be difficult to accept, he gently accentuates it: "Actually it's a very profound statement."

TO CONTEMPLATE:
Think about what we don't know that could be the root cause of all of our suffering.

## CHAPTER 3: WHAT PATIENTS ARE LOOKING FOR

When patients go to a doctor, they do so because they feel that the doctor is the person with the best chance to help them. They may be alternating between hope that the doctor will be able to cure them, and fear that nothing can be done. When the doctor demonstrates that they really care about the patient, it can immediately help put their mind at ease. Sick people are very sensitive to how the doctor might look or act, even a small gesture, such as a raised eyebrow, or a muttered, "huh." Because patients are so sensitive, it is not as effective to just "put on" a bedside manner to try to reassure the person. Therefore, trying to demonstrate a genuinely compassionate attitude will be very beneficial.

This difference between acting in a calm and kind way, and genuinely manifesting these feelings is again one of the key themes of the book. As we move through the book, try to reflect on the difference between acting compassionate, and expressing genuine compassion. Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche asserts that we can train to help strengthen a genuinely compassionate attitude. Thinking about how patients perceive the caregiver when they are ill or in pain will help us cultivate the motivation to make a lasting change in our manner when we are with patients.

TO CONTEMPLATE:
How does having a genuinely compassionate attitude differ from just acting compassionately?

## CHAPTER 4: COMBINING WISDOM AND COMPASSION

What do we mean by the word "wisdom?" Ordinarily, we feel that there is no direct way to train in wisdom—it's something that only comes from long experience.

However, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche in this book uses the word "wisdom" interchangeably with "intelligence." In this case he's referring to a specific kind of intelligence, the ability to combine "the attitude of caring along with all of one's training, experience, and knowledge of disease." Putting it all together in a package that can actually accomplish our compassionate goals can be called wisdom.

For example, we can ask the question, "When can our application of compassion do the most good?" It is easiest to be compassionate with people we know and like, who appreciate us, and follow our directions. It is much more difficult to be compassionate towards difficult or angry patients. Intelligence in this situation allows us to recognize that these patients are disturbed, that they are not acting in their own best interest. We need to generate even more patience and compassion to take care of them, rather than to blame them and walk away. Instead of getting discouraged, we can recognize the kind of problem that the patient is having—that their mind is disturbed and they are not at ease, that they don't know how to behave well. Despite that, we can decide to try to be kind to them, to help them feel more at ease. When we are able to think like this, it will make us more tolerant and less anxious when confronting difficult patients. When we succeed in handling a difficult situation, we should take satisfaction that we have done a good job.

Genuinely caring about other people, cultivating a sense of loving-kindness, gives us the motivation to try harder. If we have a loving attitude towards others, we will naturally want to help. If we have no feeling of kindness towards others, our willingness and ability to care for them will fall off rapidly.

TO CONTEMPLATE:
What is the relationship between wisdom and compassion?

## CHAPTER 5: IMPERMANENCE, THE BODY, AND THE SENSES

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche begins this chapter by reiterating the fact that our human mind has a great capacity for doing either good or harm. If we decide that we would like to orient ourselves toward doing good, then we should begin right away, as we don't know how long we will live. He points out that nothing can last forever—everything changes every moment. We will eventually have to part with everything we hold dear. As he says, "Suffering has a lot

to do with impermanence." Our lives, our health, our friends, our loved ones, will all eventually slip away. He's not just making a philosophical point—he is describing how things actually are, and having to face this kind of loss in our lives can be painful. On the other hand, accepting the fact that everything is impermanent is one way of decreasing the amount of suffering associated with change. We know that things can change, so we don't get quite as upset when they actually do change.

Rinpoche then turns to the subject of happiness. What is happiness? What is the cause of happiness? What would perfect happiness feel like? Is it based on being surrounded by pleasurable objects and friends? Rinpoche goes on to say that happiness can be defined as a moment of contentment, of thinking that whatever is happening is completely all right. It would be difficult to say that someone who is not content could be described as being happy. Contentment is the key quality of happiness, and without it, happiness can't be possible: "Not knowing how to be content prevents happiness."

Up to this point, Rinpoche has explained that suffering can be due to impermanence, and also to a constant vague feeling that we are never content. In addition, we have the physical discomfort of possessing a human body, a body that seems to be just ready to experience pain. Our body ages and falls ill, and sometimes we can fix it and sometimes not. Our body has five senses, and each of them can cause some suffering: physical touch, obnoxious odors, disturbing sights, bad tastes, and annoying sounds. Our senses can also trigger desire. Although our senses are always communicating with our mind, how much we are disturbed by these experiences depends entirely on how we are able to tolerate things in our mind. In addition, even when our senses are not disturbing us, our own mind can think of happy or sad thoughts and we can "experience emotional responses just to our own thoughts."

Due to this tendency to get carried away by our own sense impressions and thoughts, it may seem like we spend our whole lives either chasing after things that we think we want, or running away from things that we don't want. He sums this up by saying, "We pursue relationships with people and objects as if they were lasting and permanent, and then are disappointed when they are not." This is one of the root causes of suffering—our mental attachment to things that are only passing in our lives. In a book about compassion, he is saying, we need to understand the concept of impermanence, and its relationship to suffering.

At the end of this chapter, Rinpoche hints at what lies ahead. Our tendency to get caught up in our sensory perceptions and thoughts "prevents us from being natural and free." Since he has already asserted that our natural and free state of mind is what allows compassion to flow unimpeded, this is the key to the book. The very way that we perceive reality needs to be questioned. We are about to confront "dualistic thinking" head on.

TO CONTEMPLATE:
Think about what seems permanent or impermanent in your life. What is the connection between impermanence and suffering? How have you dealt with impermanence in the past?

# CHAPTER 6: DUALISTIC THINKING AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

The first paragraph of this chapter asserts the theme of the book: "It is from within this state of empty awareness that our natural compassion and wisdom grows forth." If you can truly understand what Rinpoche means here, you will be able to train in the form of compassion that is central to the book. He is describing the need to recognize the nature of our consciousness when it is not forming thoughts and attachments. How is that possible? Not understanding

how this might be possible is the ignorance that Rinpoche talked about in chapter two.

The vast and open way of perceiving that is at the heart of our basic nature transcends a sense of self and a sense of other. Our sense of self is just based on concepts that we form about ourselves. Our citizenship, gender, height, intelligence, and accomplishments are all just concepts that we hold about ourselves. Every one of those qualities is relative: if there were no other countries, we wouldn't identify as being different; our gender is posed in relation to an opposite sex; our height is always in relation to others; we are either more intelligent or less intelligent than someone else; whatever we accomplish is in relation to the accomplishments of others. Yet, so much of our suffering is based on clinging to concepts about who we are. A small amount of praise can make us feel quite happy, while a small amount of criticism can completely ruin our day or week. If we didn't cling to these concepts about ourselves, we would have nothing to feel offended or insecure about.

Remember, happiness is based on learning to feel content. One of the most important things to feel content about is our self. We also need to start investigating whether our self truly exists—what is the essence of our self that is irreducible, that can be said to the core of our identity? When we start to investigate, we can't really find that core. That's because our core is empty of the relative types of qualities that we identify with. Every quality that we think we have is just a concept that we formulate about ourselves. Yet there is no question that it appears that we have an independent existence within an outer environment. In Buddhist philosophy this is called "relative reality," and we can all agree that it appears to be real. That illusion stems from our tendency to judge and form concepts about everything we perceive. This is what dualistic thinking means. When we recognize that we are seeing something separate from our self, we immediately start to judge—"I like that, I don't like that, I don't care." These subtle likes and dislikes can form a platform for stronger emotions such as desire and anger. All of these conceptual emotions are disturbing in that they detract from an open, relaxed feeling. We need that open, relaxed feeling in order to let our compassion flow more freely. That's why Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche has included this discussion about dualistic thinking. It is this subtle mode of perceiving—something that we do without being conscious of it—that creates the obstacles to feeling free and easy. Once we start experiencing a constant string of these kinds of feelings, we are no longer able to say that we are relaxed and content.

At this point, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche asks us to think about what causes events to happen in our lives. In the West, when something good happens for no apparent reason, we call it good luck. When something bad happens, we call it bad luck. But do good and bad luck themselves have a cause? In Buddhist philosophy, it is said that our current state of mind—the concepts and emotions that we generate—and the subsequent actions that we carry out, all sow seeds into the future. When we act generously, it sows a seed of happiness in our future. When we act selfishly, it sets us up to undergo some suffering in the future. Our state of mind in the present controls not only our present contentment, but also our future happiness or suffering. Likewise, our past thoughts and actions help dictate what we are confronted with in our current life.

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche acknowledges that this way of thinking is not commonly taught in the West. So whether you believe that our current actions dictate our future suffering or not, he stresses the fact that we can't eliminate negative emotions without addressing their root cause, which is the forming of concepts. As he states, "If anger and attachment are the cause of suffering, then eliminating dualistic thinking will eliminate future suffering."

He goes on to say: "Hope stems from attachment, and fear stems from aversion or anger. Thus, the only way to ever be completely at peace is to get beyond both hope and fear, to get beyond the dualistic clinging that allows these emotions to take root." Please don't feel frustrated if you find this concept difficult to grasp. Someone who truly understands dualistic thinking is already quite far along the path towards recognizing our true nature.

TO CONTEMPLATE:
Think about the concepts you hold about yourself. What is your true, irreducible self? What parts of your outer reality do not change?

# CHAPTER 7: CONCEPTUAL AND NONCONCEPTUAL COMPASSION

The type of compassion with which we are all familiar is what Tibetan Buddhists call "conceptual" compassion. We see someone in need of help, and we form the concept that we need to help that person. It requires some conscious energy—a decision—and because of that, sometimes we wear out. But what other kind of compassion could there be?

Again, this is one of the key points of the book. The way to achieve a vast, stable, and effortless compassion is to fully understand what is meant by "nonconceptual" compassion, which is a form of compassion that flows from being able to recognize our true nature, a state that is beyond dualistic thinking. Dualistic thinking, as you will recall, is based on forming concepts about everything we experience. In order to tap into our innate compassion, we need to be able to go beyond concepts, which is why this form of compassion is called "nonconceptual compassion." Once we are able to abandon, even briefly, our habit of forming concepts about everything, we experience our innate consciousness that is as inseparable from compassion as the quality of wetness is from water.

When we experience nonconceptual compassion, we no longer have to form the thought, "I would like to help this person," or "I need to help this person." Our natural compassion just expresses itself in spontaneous ways. If this seems hard to comprehend, that's because it is. It means understanding the nature of our mind in a whole new way. However, we should remember that what Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche is pointing out does not involve reprogramming our mind in a new way, but simply learning to recognize how our mind naturally is. The Tibetan Buddhist insight is that our mind is "emptiness suffused with compassion," the term that he introduced in the first chapter. Now we are in a better position to understand what that means. "Emptiness," is a term that means that our mind can be aware without forming concepts: "empty" means "no concepts," whereas the syllable "ness" refers to simultaneously being aware of that state. Within this state of empty awareness, our consciousness is suffused with compassion in such a way that it is inseparable from it.

Still, how is it possible to act for the benefit of others if we don't have the thought to help others? We can think of it like this: we've already established that having a relaxed mind can make it easier to be compassionate when we need to, so what we are really discussing here is what is the ultimate relaxed mind. Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche is pointing out that the ultimate relaxed mind is one in which there is no clinging to concepts, no negative emotions, and no obscurations. In this state of mind, our compassion is free to flow unimpeded, because it is the nature of our consciousness to be compassionate.

Since it is likely that most of us have had no experience of this state of mind, we just need to keep an open mind about the possibility at this point. Ultimately, understanding dualistic thinking and nonconceptual compassion does not take place at a purely intellectual level. We need to learn to meditate, and eventually an experienced teacher can guide us to having a direct experience of our own mind nature. Once we can recognize our mind nature through our own experience, it no longer remains a theoretical construct, but becomes incorporated in our direct experience, just like any other experience in our lives. At that point, we can begin to practice with more confidence.

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche goes on to explain just what it is that makes it difficult to recognize our own mind nature. What obscures our ability

to recognize our mind nature are two things: the negative emotions, and the cognitive obscurations. The negative emotions are the constant flow of judging that we encounter, the liking and disliking that leads to desire and anger, and other negative emotions such as jealousy, and pride. This constant flow of thought activity makes it difficult to just be open and concerned about others, or to even feel relaxed. Negative emotions are easy to recognize, but it takes some training to help them decrease.

The second problem is the cognitive obscuration. Compared to negative emotions, this is more subtle to recognize, and more difficult to eliminate. The cognitive obscuration is when we engage in dualistic thinking—seeing our environment as separate from our own awareness. Because of our habit of seeing the world around us as being more solid and separate from us than it actually is, our view of reality is obscured: a cognitive obscuration.

The effect of negative emotions and the cognitive obscuration is to prevent us from experiencing the pure nature of our mind. Decreasing the two obscurations "makes room for an incredible intelligence and compassion to manifest." As Rinpoche states: "What is perfected is profound intelligence and compassion that are not dependent on our transient thoughts and emotions." This way of training did not arise out of Western philosophy or religion, and the introduction of this insight—which comes directly from Tibetan Buddhist philosophy—is one of the major contributions that Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche is making in this book.

Conceptual compassion is something we know about; nonconceptual compassion represents the vast potential for an entirely new kind of compassion that can manifest in one's life. The specific training that can begin to make this possible is described in the next section of the book.

TO CONTEMPLATE:
We are all familiar with conceptual compassion. What are the qualities that could be associated with nonconceptual compassion? What could effortless compassion feel like?



# CHAPTER 8: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A SPIRITUAL PRACTITIONER?

When we think of the words "spiritual practitioner," what does that mean to you? A lot of thoughts can come to mind: to try to be kind and mindful, to follow the precepts of a given religion, to try to tame one's negative emotions. However, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche is going deeper with his definition. To be a spiritual practitioner, he says, is to try to understand the nature of reality itself, not just how things seem to be, but how they actually are. Is this even a problem: are things not the way they appear to be?

How things appear seems obvious to us. We exist as individuals within an outer world that seems solid and real. We interact with other beings, and we are sometimes happy and sometimes sad. This is the "relative reality" that we talked about earlier. How else could it be? What if things are not so solid, not so permanent? How would that change things for us? Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche states: "When you begin to loosen the grip that makes you view everything as being solid and permanent, you are starting on the path that can allow you to decrease the effect of negative emotions and cognitive obscurations and to allow your natural good qualities to unfold. Such a person then deserves the name 'spiritual practitioner.'"

It may not be obvious why a doctor or nurse should want to identify as a spiritual practitioner. Why is Rinpoche shifting the discussion towards wanting us to be spiritual practitioners, rather than just good doctors and nurses? Many readers may already have a spiritual path, or not have any interest in pursuing one. However, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche is trying to encourage us to become a person who is attempting to dig a little deeper into the mystery of life, of how we exist in the universe. He's trying to make us question how we relate to the outer world, and to ourselves, and in so doing, will make the point that this may be a way to connect with a much more vast concept of compassion. A person who

is undertaking this kind of exploration needs a name, and the name he suggests is "spiritual practitioner."

By defining a spiritual practitioner as someone who is trying to see things as they actually are, not as they seem, this pursuit should not be at odds with anyone's prior beliefs. More specifically, doctors and nurses are already professionally engaged in the pursuit of trying to see things as they actually are in relation to medicine: trying to make a diagnosis, choose the correct treatment, or interpret tests correctly. Using that professional attitude in order to understand the nature and possibilities of compassion only makes sense.

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche then gives some examples of how we may assume things to be a certain way until we investigate more carefully. The first thing he takes on is whether we can see the existence of something that can't be seen. Since he has said that the mind is empty, that means that it has no qualities that would allow it to be seen—just like empty space. He asks us if we can see empty space. Of course we can't see it, but we can see that empty space exists, or else we would not be able to move around. We can be sure that there is something called empty space, even though we are not able to directly see it. Likewise, we could use the same logic to say that we can see that it is possible to perceive that our mind could be empty, even though it has the qualities of awareness. This is not easy, and as a result there are a lot of teachings that have been given to help people come to see this for themselves. Since it is one of the key points of the book, it is worth spending some time thinking about what it means to have a mind that is empty, yet still aware.

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche then goes on to give some examples of how we attribute solidity and inherent existence to things that are just made up of parts, such as a room, or our bodies. If we dig even deeper we can recognize that these objects are not just made out of gross parts, like walls, ceilings, arms, legs, and head, but they are made out of molecules and atoms, and even these tiny particles have sub particles that can continue to be divided and eventually disappear into energy. It is the way we assemble reality with our minds that leads us to assume it is more inherently solid and self-existing than it actually is.

So, for Rinpoche to say that reality is not as solid and permanent as we think is not a far stretch from how modern science views things as well. This is what Rinpoche meant at the beginning of the chapter when he said that we should try to see things as they actually are, not as they appear to be. The tricky point is to understand how this all fits together. How can understanding the empty nature of reality help us become more compassionate?

If you recall what Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche said earlier, our tendency to cling to things as being real and solid is due to our ignorance of how things actually are. The negative emotions that we experience are due to forming opinions about, and attachments to, the things around us. These negative emotions prevent us from feeling relaxed enough mentally to allow our natural compassion to shine forth. So, in order to be calmer mentally, it helps to recognize that the things that we are getting so attached to are not as solid and real as they seem.

We already utilize this insight, without thinking about it too much. When we have friends who are upset about something we say, "Don't take it so seriously. It will be all right. Don't worry so much." At that moment we are really telling them that they might be overly attached to what is going on, and they could feel better by just letting go a little bit, by learning to relax. What Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche is saying is that we can apply this advice more and more widely in our lives, as we learn to view life as a passing display about which we don't have to form such strong opinions.

This is a very profound way of looking at the world, and it raises a lot of questions, most prominently, "How can we not take the suffering of ourselves and others seriously? Isn't suffering the reason that we need to apply compassion."This is exactly the point: because suffering is present, and its cause is from taking things too seriously, we can help decrease suffering in ourselves and others by cultivating a more relaxed mind. If appearances were solid and real, it would not be sensible to decide that they are not. But since it is possible to prove that appearances are not as

real as we think, it can be sensible to not get so attached to them.

One cannot just decide to change how we view the world and expect that to overcome our habits of this (and perhaps) many lifetimes. That's why this section of the book is called "training." The training that Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche sets forth is a way to gradually see how our thoughts form, and how our attachment to thoughts keeps us from being at ease. We rarely have confidence that we will always feel relaxed; we spend our lives in alternating hope and fear, usually just waiting to find out how we are going to feel next. Wouldn't it be valuable to feel that one could handle whatever arises, in any circumstance? Wouldn't our ability to act compassionately in these situations be enhanced?

Setting out to confront this issue is comparable to the quest that the buddhas all undertook. The Buddha is not just an historical figure who lived in India twenty-five hundred years ago, but the name that is given to any spiritual practitioner who accomplishes two things: the purification of negative emotions and cognitive obscurations, and the perfection of profound wisdom and compassion. The term "buddha" literally means, "purified and perfected." Thousands, perhaps countless beings have attained this state through following the practices that make this possible, and continue to do so even in our present age. Our quest to become more compassionate towards patients can be said to be a tiny step along this same path, a path that is open to anyone. All it takes is the motivation to want to ease suffering in others, and the willingness to train in perfecting the qualities of wisdom and compassion in oneself.

TO CONTEMPLATE:
How can seeing our mind as empty awareness allow us to train in a vast form of compassion?



# CHAPTER 9: DEVELOPING A COMPASSIONATE ATTITUDE

What Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche now wants to introduce is a way to approach the cultivation of compassion not just from the point of view of recognizing empty awareness (which take some time to learn), but by consciously molding our habits to more consistently think of the welfare of others, a quality that he refers to as noble. By reminding ourselves over and over again how we would like to be, we gradually form the habit of being that way. This is not the ultimate method for achieving unlimited compassion, but it is a practical and necessary step, something that each of us can start at any given moment, without any prior training.

"Compassion is just a thought," he says, which is true. But he has already laid the groundwork for explaining that compassion is so much more than a thought. Here, however, he recognizes that we can't just skip to the point at which we experience nonconceptual compassion. There are steps along the way. One of these steps is to consciously turn our thoughts towards compassion. "Fortunately," he states, "We have the power to consciously mold our habitual tendencies. Habits of thinking are created by whatever predominates in our mind." He suggests that we remind ourselves to be compassionate and loving, not just here or there, but in a more consistent way—when we wake up in the morning, during the day when we need a boost, and particularly right before we go to sleep, so that we can sleep through the night with the benefit of positive thoughts.

If we are able to do this, we can gradually transform how others see us. When we judge others, we may decide that they are a good or bad person. What we are judging is their tendency to be kind or their tendency to be selfish. These are just habits, and they can be changed. "As we grow accustomed to maintaining a noble attitude," Rinpoche

adds, "we gradually experience the ripening of the altruistic heart, set free from any limitations or boundaries." Without this noble attitude, without this conscious shift in awareness, our further training is not likely to help us very much. This important first step can be started at this very moment. The key to becoming more compassionate is in the palm of your hand, ready to be used whenever you decide.

TO CONTEMPLATE:
What steps can you take to start forming the habit of being more compassionate?

# CHAPTER 10: THE KEY TO COMPASSION

Now that we have decided to try to remind ourselves to be compassionate and kind as much as we can, we need to turn our attention towards cultivating compassion that comes from within. As Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche points out, our inner compassion is already present and complete, like a clear blue sky. When clouds obscure the sky, it doesn't change the nature of the clear blue sky, which remains completely unchanged behind the clouds. Likewise, when our compassion is obscured by our negative emotions, the basic compassion remains unchanged.

The way to start removing the obscurations is to learn to relax. Not just a superficial relaxation, but learning to relax, in a deep way. How do we learn how to do that? We can get our body to relax physically, but if our mind is still racing and dealing with thoughts and emotions, we don't think of that as being truly relaxed. The body can be relaxed, but the mind can still be busy. "As long as we remain preoccupied with the endless flow of our thoughts, the mind does not relax. The more that the busyness of being caught up with our thoughts is allowed to subside, to the same extent the mind eases off and relaxes."

Most of us experience our mind as an endless series of thoughts and concerns, only rarely interrupted by a peaceful moment, or a deep feeling of contentment. However, those types of moments are when our inner compassion can be most accessible. Since we've all lived quite a few years now, and finding a deep inner contentment suffused with compassion has not yet happened by itself, it's likely that we will need to do some training to allow this to happen. As Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche points out, having a relaxed mind simply feels better. A calm mind feels peaceful, and as a result our natural intelligence is able to manifest more easily. One of Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche's favorite sayings is, "Calm mind, kind mind, clear mind." One needs to cultivate a calm mind, which then automatically becomes more kind, and allows more clarity of thought. This is the key to every good thing we can aspire to in our lives. Maintaining a busy, clouded, slightly selfish mind will not help us achieve our goals.

Here he makes the analogy that sitting down to allow our mind to become peaceful for a few minutes a day is actually like going on a small vacation. By reminding ourselves how to practice feeling calm, we can do it at any moment, without having to plan days in advance to free up a stretch of time or travel somewhere else. "We need to learn to be relaxed and at ease." We need to learn this because our habits of not being relaxed and at ease are so ingrained. We need to form new habits, so that we can eventually feel relaxed and at ease continuously, not just in the few moments that we sit down to practice. "Those who become expert at something without any training are very rare…being at ease with yourself is something that you can train in and will become easier with practice."

Just as Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche stated earlier in the book, we can't hope to become free of negative emotions without addressing their cause. We can't hope to become relaxed and at ease without looking into how we constantly form thoughts and emotions, and can't just let things be. We need to put in some time to form new habits that will eventually

help us have a calmer mind, a kinder mind, and a clearer mind. It's a noble goal, and in the next chapter, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche will introduce us to meditation as a means of accomplishing this goal.

TO CONTEMPLATE:
Reflect on the relationship between having a calm mind, and the ability to express compassion more easily.

# CHAPTER 11: LEARNING TO MEDITATE

"Meditation," as a term in the West, has come to describe a vast array of activities, from sitting and thinking about a topic, to walking, listening to tapes, or focusing on different types of objects, words, and sounds. Here, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche uses meditation synonymously with relaxation. However, he's not just talking about sitting down with a drink and watching television, but a specific form of cultivating a relaxed mind.

Continuing on with his focus on thought-free awareness, Rinpoche condenses all the forms of meditation into two categories: meditation with effort, and meditation that is effortless. It is difficult to initially understand how meditation, which appears to be a conscious practice of sitting down and looking at one's mind, could be effortless in its execution. Although we can say the words, "just let our mind be as it naturally is without altering anything"—which should be effortless—it takes a little work to understand how that could be possible.

In the absence of being able to "rest in our basic awareness," our mind tends to continually get carried away with thoughts and feelings. Since we don't know how to recognize our basic, aware nature, we experience our habitual state of mind, which is always chasing after one thought or another. Therefore, to get started, we need a meditation technique that will help us let go of this unending stream of thoughts. Letting go of thoughts is something that automatically allows our mind to feel more relaxed.

However, before we get started with focusing on our mind, Rinpoche reminds us to think about our motivation in learning to meditate. Thinking about our motivation is what allows our meditation to be more than a mental exercise aimed at making our ordinary daily lives a little easier. He wants us to aim higher than that. In addition to wanting to learn how to be calm, we should acknowledge that our real goal is to become more compassionate, "not simply to benefit myself, but also so that I may be of benefit to others." He wants us to take some delight in sitting down to cultivate something positive, something that can help remove our negative tendencies, and make us able to benefit others more easily. This is really something to celebrate, so we should approach our meditation practice with a sense of anticipation, a sense of joy, because we are beginning something positive.

Rinpoche is trying to help us get in touch with our inner nature, our inner qualities that are identical to those of a buddha. Just as a precious jewel can be encrusted in dried mud, our inner nature may not be visible. As we begin to wipe off the mud, the qualities of the jewel gradually become obvious.

Our obscurations prevent us from cultivating genuine compassion and wisdom for all beings, and our negative tendencies tend to carry us away, leading us into unhappy situations, both in the present and in the future. Unless we consciously take some steps to decrease these obscurations, we can never fully realize our potential. Sitting down to meditate is the first step that can reverse the ignorance that has clouded our whole life (and possibly endless lifetimes), and start steering us toward something positive. If we contemplate this situation deeply, we will not want to carry on even one more day just reacting to our surroundings, feeling up and down and living in hope and fear. We will want to take control, to start moving in the right direction, and we will not want to waste any time. It is this kind of motivation that Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche is encouraging us to develop. For as he points out, it is not just ourselves

who suffer due to our own obscurations—it is all sentient beings. If we can learn how to steer our own future, we can also learn how to be more kind and compassionate to all beings who suffer in exactly the same ways that we suffer.

There are also other ways to help steer our lives in a positive direction. Rinpoche mentions some of the practices that are performed by Tibetan Buddhists, such as going on a pilgrimage, performing prostrations, or making offerings in front of statues. He says that these activities may look funny to us if we don't understand their skillful purpose within that tradition. However, he goes on to say that there are skillful practices that we can utilize as well, that can help steer our lives in the right direction, in addition to just meditation practice.

One of the most important of these activities, he points out, is to learn to apologize. We often inadvertently, or in the heat of the moment, hurt someone's feelings, sometimes in a way that could last a whole lifetime if we don't try to correct it. Apologizing is a way of recognizing our compassion for others, of decreasing our own ego attachment to always being right, and to demonstrate that we value getting along more than justifying something that we thought we needed to say or do. As such, apologizing can be a skillful spiritual practice. As Rinpoche states, "It's an example of using a good method to bring about a beneficial result."

He then restates the key purpose of meditation: "To eliminate negative traits in our mind and to promote our natural good qualities." The negative traits are easy to understand, but we should note that when he talks about good qualities, he uses the term "natural." He doesn't apply the term "natural," to our negative qualities, which are based on being obscured. He is again emphasizing that our basic nature is one of compassion and wisdom; when we clear away our negative traits, our good qualities naturally emerge.

In the rest of the chapter, Rinpoche gives directions on how to begin meditating. He gave these instructions verbally to the audience members, who then practiced meditation right then. Therefore, you can think of these teachings as verbal instructions from a genuine teacher on how to meditate, reading them over before you start each time, until it becomes natural for you to sit down and do it on your own. He guides us as to how to use a neutral thought to calm our minds, which allows us to observe how busy our minds can actually be. It is common for beginners to feel that they can't meditate at all because their minds are so busy, but that is exactly the purpose of meditation—to see what is really going on in our minds! This moment of observing this endless busyness, and wanting to bring that under control for the first time is the true start of meditation practice. We try to create some space within a neutral frame of mind from which we can begin to observe how thoughts arise and dissipate, reappear and change.

However, even in this brief introduction to a beginning meditation technique, Rinpoche does not let us forget our true goal, the ability to eventually rest in thought-free wakefulness. It is likely, at some point along the way, that we will need some additional instructions to recognize this state, but in this chapter Rinpoche lays out what that path would look like. By the end of the chapter, he points out that when we can be stable in thought-free wakefulness, we will notice our negative qualities just falling away, and our noble qualities emerging spontaneously. At the point at which this takes place in a completely effortless way, we will discover that we are enjoying the exact same mental state that is called being enlightened. As Rinpoche states: "It's not something other than that." He has laid out the entire meditation path to enlightenment in a couple of pages! Enlightenment is not some physical destination at which we will eventually arrive—it is simply our mental state when we are no longer clinging to the two obscurations.

A key point to hold in mind is that we start our meditation practice by having a focus. As our mind gets more used to settling itself, over weeks or months, we gradually let go of our reliance on a focus, and are able to just observe our mind, and let thoughts go by themselves. As we advance, meditation techniques become more effortless, rather than more complicated, but this very ease and subtlety is what is deceptive, and why we need a teacher to help guide us through the higher levels of meditation practice.

TO CONTEMPLATE:

Think about your efforts at meditation. Do you think you make more progress when the meditation session feels difficult, or when it feels very easy? What are the advantages or disadvantages of both situations?

# CHAPTER 12: LEARNING TO MONITOR OUR MENTAL STATE

Now that we have been introduced to the practice of meditation, is that sufficient? If we meditate twenty minutes a day, can we then just go about our day as we did before? According to Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, in order to really modify the habits of a lifetime, we need to think about it more than once a day. If we really want to expand our compassion toward others, we need to use some other techniques as well. Rinpoche here introduces three stages in cultivating a compassionate attitude. Right now, we tend to think of ourselves as more important than others, which seems natural to us. However, since others care about themselves as much as we care about ourselves, and want to be happy in exactly the same ways, we should at least try to think of others as being equal to ourselves. Later, as our compassion expands, it is possible to think of others as being more important than ourselves.

It may be difficult to imagine treating others as being more important than our own feelings and our own comfort. Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche recognizes this, and gives the example of how parents can instantly make that switch when a baby is born. Even though the baby is a complete stranger at that moment, the parents immediately care more about that baby than their own comfort and safety. Rinpoche attributes this "spontaneous shift" in attitude to the love and affection that the parents experience toward their child. The love of a parent towards their child is so pure that it causes this shift in attitude.

Rinpoche then talks about the difference between attraction and pure love as it applies to relationships between people. When love is based on attraction and how good the other person makes you feel, it can be shaky. When it is based on a genuine caring and respect, the love will be pure and stable. It is a kind of love that doesn't depend on the recipient doing something in return.

The pure love of a mother or father for their child will automatically teach them patience and diligence. The parent will experience a kind of mindfulness that they didn't have before—they will always be thinking of where the child is, and whether it is okay. There will rarely be a moment when the parent is not remembering that they have a child, particularly when the child is very young. This constant awareness is an example of a kind of mindfulness that we could apply to monitoring our own mental state—how we are feeling, whether we are irritable, angry, happy, sad, or fed up. If we have a positive attitude, we can take satisfaction in that, but if our attitude is negative, we can try to turn it around at that point. Rinpoche points out that just noticing that we are in a negative frame of mind will not change it. We need to switch directions, to try to turn a negative state of mind at least to a neutral state, and then into something wholesome and noble. Although at our stage it is necessary to consciously try to shape our mental state, Rinpoche does not let us forget that concentrating on having a noble state of mind is still a form of mental clinging, and that to really have a pure positive attitude we need to eventually transcend the dualistic thinking that creates the platform for all of our negative emotions.

He encourages us to investigate this concept until we can resolve it for ourselves. What does dualistic thinking really mean? How can we get beyond that? What would that feel like? We need to prove it to ourselves through our own experience, which can only ultimately be gained through a combination of learning, reflection, and meditation practice, coupled with the mindfulness of working towards our goal every day. If we really

want to have more compassion and wisdom, we can't just leave it as a vague wish. We need to put it at the forefront of our mind, to develop a mindfulness that is "as strong as a mother's vigilance for the welfare of her baby." With these techniques, and with a sincere effort we can move towards a kind of wisdom and compassion that is truly limitless.

TO CONTEMPLATE:
"Mindfulness" is a commonly used word in the West these days, and refers to a type of meditation as well as a kind of awareness. What does Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche mean when he uses the term mindfulness in this chapter?

## CHAPTER 13: THE QUALITIES OF AN AUTHENTIC TEACHER

Throughout the book, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche has hinted at the fact that we will eventually need to find a teacher to help us fully realize our potential. In this chapter, he describes the qualities that a fully enlightened teacher might manifest. Although he admits that the descriptions may "sound pretty unbelievable," this is an area where we should try to keep an open mind. After all, the book is about trying to manifest a limitless form of compassion. If we don't have examples of teachers who have achieved this form of compassion and wisdom, why should we believe that it is possible? In Buddhist philosophy, the view of our mind is that it has the potential for some quite amazing qualities, including a vast awareness of the universe, and a capability of spontaneously acting for the benefit of sentient beings in all circumstances.

It would be difficult to believe that a person with such qualities could exist if there had not been some living examples in our own world. The historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, was born a prince in Nepal, and lived a life of luxury and comfort. However, he grew increasingly uncomfortable with the realization that suffering is inevitable for human beings, who must all face the discomforts of aging, sickness, and death. He set out to see if there was a way to get beyond suffering. When he felt that he had achieved that goal, he taught for another fifty years, leaving the legacy that we can still follow today.

As Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche teaches in this book, the key to getting beyond suffering is to transcend a dualistic view of the world, to be aware of what's going on without clinging to thoughts, to rest in thought-free awareness. The Buddha is an example of a being that has shown the way to perfect this state of mind. He was a living historical example, and a written record of his teachings is still available today. In addition, the teachings have been passed down orally from the Buddha directly to his disciples, who in turn perfected the qualities within themselves, and passed them on to the next generation. This succession of oral teachings has been continued in an unbroken chain from the Buddha down to our current generation of teachers, such as Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche. The continuity of the written teachings along with oral commentary and instructions has maintained the Buddhist teachings in a very pure form. When one reads a text from the 11th century, for example, it gives exactly the same description of meditation and the nature of our mind as do the teachings today.

The purpose of this chapter is to help expand our view of what it might be possible to achieve through applying the teachings that have been passed down in this way, to gain not just a small boost in our compassion and patience, but to aim for compassion that is truly unlimited. The historical Buddha is just one example of a being that achieved a stable form of enlightenment. Anyone can become a buddha, just as any flower seed can grow into a fully formed flower as long as it encounters the right circumstances of moisture, soil, heat, etc. We all contain the seed of enlightenment, and if we encounter the right set of teachings and develop pure motivation, we too can eventually achieve this remarkably open, kind, and wise state of mind.

The example that Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche uses in the chapter is apt: we can't measure the size of the universe with a tape measure. Likewise, we may not be able to judge the capability of our own minds using our current set of assumptions. We don't have to immediately accept all that Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche is saying, but we should be open to greater possibilities. If we truly feel that our mind's capability is limited to what we experience now, we will not find it easy to set out on a path towards less limited compassion.

TO CONTEMPLATE:
Think about ways in which your own compassion could be less limited. How would you use more compassion if you had it?

## CHAPTER 14: EXAMPLES OF ENLIGHTENED RESOLVE

If the example of the Buddha is too grandiose for us to initially relate to, what other examples can we use? Within Tibetan Buddhism, there are people who have become extraordinary examples of compassionate beings. These people, having recognized that the suffering of sentient beings is due to ignorance of how things really are, have resolved to try to relieve that suffering in any way they can, for as long as it takes to relieve the suffering of all beings. These courageous people are called "bodhisattvas," and they demonstrate to us that we can set our sights high when it comes to compassion. In order to begin to train in the kind of compassion that bodhisattvas aspire toward, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche tells us about six specific qualities that bodhisattvas use to train to make their compassion more effective. For those of you familiar with Buddhist teachings, these are the six paramitas, or virtuous activities of a bodhisattva. In this book, they have been adapted toward a medical setting.



The first virtue is generosity, which means to be willing to exert one's time and energy towards helping other people, to not hold back and be stingy with one's caring efforts. The second virtue is ethics, which in the context of this book means the willingness to always do what's necessary—to do the right thing. The third virtue is tolerance, to cultivate the patience to deal with difficult situations and difficult patients. The fourth virtue is perseverance, which means not only tolerating what is going on, but to continue to work on behalf of the sick person. To be able to relieve the suffering of others is a gift, something that we can take satisfaction in setting out to do. As Rinpoche points out, we always have energy to do the things we enjoy, so if we remind ourselves that caring for people can bring us satisfaction, we can utilize what he calls "joyous diligence," taking pleasure in the fact that we are helping others. The fifth virtue is concentration, which means that we pay attention to what we are doing, and make sure that we don't make any mistakes while we are working. The sixth virtue is to suffuse the first five virtues with a kind of intelligence that makes sure that overall we are doing the best for everyone, using all of our wisdom and compassion to make sure that the people we care for are getting as much help as we can give them. Rinpoche points out that this virtue may mean that we need to be able to consult others and ask for help when needed, without worrying about our own ego.

There are two levels of trying to express enlightened compassion, or bodhicitta, similar to what Rinpoche taught earlier as conceptual compassion and non-conceptual compassion. Here he refers to relative bodhicitta, which is a conscious effort to cultivate compassion, and absolute bodhicitta, which is the expression of compassion when we are able to recognize and rest in our own mind nature.

TO CONTEMPLATE:
Think about each of these six qualities, and how you might employ them in your own work.

# CHAPTER 15:
# THE NEED FOR A TEACHER

When it comes to spiritual matters, many people feel that they can discover the right path for themselves. Particularly with well-educated people, we feel that by reading, watching television, or going to a few lectures, we can figure out a way to gain qualities that we would like to have. Many people are skeptical of spiritual teachers, and this may be a healthy skepticism.

However, in this chapter Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche points out that as with any important and complex subject, a teacher is necessary. Because Rinpoche is addressing health professionals, he uses the example of becoming a doctor, and points out that there are no self-taught doctors; one can't just start healing other people based on the desire to do so, or from a self-directed learning curriculum. We need teachers to steer us towards what is important, and can genuinely help others.

Using the example of professors in medical school, he adds that they not only need to have technical knowledge, but it helps if they can demonstrate kindness and compassion and patience as well. He asserts that these qualities are also necessary for spiritual instructors. It's not enough to just have the theory of how our compassion and wisdom could be improved, but he or she must have experienced these changes themselves through their own practice, so that they can teach authentically from their own experience. One wouldn't want to study compassion with someone who is short-tempered, irritable, or mean. If what they are teaching has not been able to eradicate these qualities in themselves, how can we believe that applying those teachings will help ourselves?

In a culture of Tibetans, spiritual teachers are usually recognized, and often have a following already. However, even in Tibet, students were cautioned in books written a thousand years ago to check out the qualities of a prospective teacher before becoming a follower. Our human lives are precious, and having discovered the desire to improve oneself spiritually, it would be an unfortunate mistake to follow a teacher who is incapable of bringing about real changes.

For readers of this book, it may seem daunting to find a genuine spiritual guide who can instruct you personally. It's true that spiritual guides who combine philosophical learning and meditation experience are rare in our society. However, also rare are the students who genuinely want to pursue the study of compassion and wisdom, to use their lives to transform themselves in order to benefit other beings, and make their own lives happier. Once this genuine desire to train in compassion is cultivated, it can often create a path to finding what we need. For example, if one hears about a teacher who might be able to help, one can go and listen to a lecture and see if one feels a connection. If not, one can pursue other teachers.

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche is trying to convey to us that once we can identify a genuine teacher, and if we have the sincere qualities of a qualified student, then we can really make progress. Because I have spent nearly thirty years studying with Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, I believe that you can trust the advice in this book, and treat it as if you have gotten personal instruction on these topics. Even so, in order to progress through the stages that lead to non-conceptual compassion, you will need to find a personal teacher at some point. You should not think of this as an insurmountable hurdle, but as natural and common sense as it would be to have to attend medical school in order to become a qualified doctor.

TO CONTEMPLATE:

What are the obstacles that we might encounter in trying to find a qualified teacher? What steps can we take to try to find a teacher?

# CHAPTER 16: DIFFERENT KINDS OF TEACHERS

The issue of finding a teacher is significant enough that Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche devotes another chapter to it. However, in this chapter he points out how we can utilize experiences from our daily life to help guide us in the right direction. He lists four kinds of teachers for us to think about.

The first would be the words from an enlightened being. We can no longer meet the historical Buddha in person, but fortunately his students wrote down what he taught, and we can find these texts and take advantage of the wisdom in them, even 2500 years later. We can also take advantage of the writings of great practitioners who followed the Buddha's advice, then distilled the many teachings into key points that have been passed down through the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. These distilled instructions can be highly valuable.

In the absence of a Buddha who can teach us directly, we can seek out a living lineage teacher. Although he is too humble to list himself in this category, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche is the classic example of the living lineage teacher, the latest in line of an unbroken chain of disciples and teachers that date back to the Buddha himself. There has never been a break in the oral instructions of Buddhist philosophy, so we can have confidence in the authenticity of what is being taught. He points out that a living lineage teacher needs to have certain qualities in order to be effective. He or she must be able to understand the philosophy and logic behind Buddhist insights, but also to have been able to apply these instructions to themselves so that they have direct experience of what he calls "compassionate emptiness." This is a complex term, which basically refers to non-conceptual compassion. As you may have noticed, this is the recurring theme in the book: the nature of reality and how we relate to that with our mind. These concepts are difficult to resolve with certainty just from reading about them; this is the main reason that a teacher is necessary at some point in one's training.

The third type of teacher that Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche describes is easier to access, as it is called "the symbolic teacher of experiences," the day-to-day events that occur in our own lives. Even though these experiences all feel very real and tangible, they pass behind us instantly as they occur. Where do these experiences go once they have happened? At this point, they only really exist in our own mind as we recall them. If they are forgotten, or we consciously let them go, where do they reside? Everything is impermanent and changeable, like watching clouds in the sky. Even though the experiences are transient, we can learn from them. If we need to treat someone who is dying, we can learn what it is like to face impermanence in a very personal way. It can remind us that what we are studying is really true. What will we feel like when it comes time to face our own death?

Although many people have beliefs about what happens when we die, it is difficult to know for certain. People may have doubts as the time to die approaches, and this can cause fear. From the Buddhist point of view, our mind is having thoughts and feelings right now. When it comes time to die, it is the same mind that experiences the death, and it is also the same mind that has experiences after we die. Therefore, the practice that we do in this lifetime, the stability and insight we can gain in our mind, is what will help us while we are dying and after we die. Every other type of material gain, or physical accomplishment, will not be able to help us at that point.

The fourth type of teacher is what we can learn from experiencing our own innate nature. He repeats several similar phrases here, which partly reflects the difficulty of translating Tibetan terms into English, but also the precision with which the Tibetan language treats terms that have to do with consciousness. "Self-existing" and "intrinsic" basically have the same meaning, indicating that no outer force created our mind, or our ability to perceive. Likewise, "wakefulness" and "awareness" are similar terms, which mean not only do we perceive in a certain way, but we can also recognize the innate qualities of our mind at the same

time. "Unconditioned" means that our mind is not formed or acted on by outer forces. It is our basic nature, our Buddha nature, and this basic state is not dependent upon circumstances or training. All the training that we do is designed to allow us to recognize our inner qualities exactly as they are. He also introduces another term, "innate suchness," to refer to these qualities.

When we learn how to recognize our own innate suchness, we automatically start to have experiences that allow our wisdom and compassion to expand. In this way, our own meditation practice, if done in the right way, can be our most profound teacher. But how do we find time to engage in this kind of practice?

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche points out that we usually find time in our lives for the things that interest us the most. If we are interested in physical fitness or food, we can usually find time to run or cook. Likewise, if we have a very sincere desire to see how far our spiritual practice can take us, then finding time to practice will not be difficult. If we have just a wishy-washy feeling that it might be helpful, we will just have wishy-washy results.

Rinpoche goes on to describe three types of practitioners who are able to make spiritual progress in their lives. The first is the person who abandons daily life and goes into the remote mountains to practice without distractions. The second is the person who joins a monastic situation, either as a monk or a nun, who then has their daily practice and teachings completely laid out for them, without the complications of engaging in family life and work. The third person is the lay practitioner who tries to balance the emotional and physical challenges of carrying out daily life while trying to fit spiritual practice in where they can.

Although from our Western view it may seem that going off to the mountains might be the most difficult path, from a Tibetan Buddhist point of view it is the easiest, with fewest distractions, and the greatest opportunity for progress. However, before this type of practice can be effective, the practitioner must spend months or years with a qualified teacher so that they can be certain to benefit from their individual practice.



Joining a monastic community has the advantages of being around like-minded people without the emotional difficulties that can ensue when one marries and has children and has to earn a living. As such, this is considered the second most favorable way to practice. It's interesting that Tibetans see joining a monastic community not as a way of being forced to give up sex, family life, and work, but as a way of not having to deal with the emotions and complications that stem from choosing family life.

Trying to be a lay practitioner is the most difficult way to achieve spiritual progress, but if one has good motivation, keeps consistent mindfulness, and utilizes the events that arise as a spur to one's practice, it can also lead to very good outcomes. Of course it is most likely that health professionals will be lay practitioners, practicing medicine, while trying to increase their compassion and wisdom as they go along. As Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche pointed out in the last chapter, someone pursuing a spiritual path needs to meet beings who are in need of help if in order to learn how to help other beings. A doctor or a nurse is in an excellent position to train spiritually, for as one monk told me in Nepal, "You are so fortunate to be a doctor. You get to make your living by easing suffering in others."

TO CONTEMPLATE:

Think about how you can use the experiences that come up in your life—both good and bad—as learning opportunities. How do our own reactions to circumstances change the lessons that we can learn?

# CHAPTER 17: CULTIVATING A CALM MINDERS

"Like water clears when undisturbed, mind clears when undisturbed." What does it mean to have an undisturbed mind? The only thing that disturbs our mind is our own thoughts. This simple observation may not be obvious to us. We are so used to reacting to the things around us—to take offense, get impatient, feel desire, or reflect on old resentments or losses—that our mind is never simply at rest. We react to our own thoughts so quickly that it seems that there is no possibility of inserting a gap between the perception that induces the thought, and the thought itself.

This idea can be exemplified by the common feeling that we have: "If only he or she hadn't said that, I wouldn't have to feel like this." The idea that it is natural to feel hurt or offended, and that the fault lies with the other person, is how we have grown up thinking. Yet, if we want to be honest with ourselves, how we react to someone or something is completely up to us. We make those choices all the time—whether to get upset if someone cuts in line in front of us, or to step aside and let them in. To take a disappointing announcement about a flight you are about to get on with anger, or just a shrug of the shoulders.

Many of us have learned to acknowledge that some things are out of our control, like the weather for example. It doesn't make much sense to get upset about the weather, even if it interferes with our plans. There's nothing we can do about it, and we should be able to convince ourselves that the weather is not out to get us personally. We are more likely to get upset if someone directs negative comments at us. On the other hand, some people go around with a lot of anger just under the surface, ready to explode at even a small provocation. We even have names for this situational anger: road rage, air rage, etc. We can recognize that people who are prone to sudden anger or resentment do not have a calm mind, and are far from being able to just take things in stride.



Cultivating a calm mind does not just mean getting calm for a few minutes while we are meditating. The purpose of meditation is to relax our mind, to see how that feels, and to recognize what it takes to feel relaxed. The greater purpose of meditation is to allow us to carry this calm feeling around with us the rest of the day. The result is not just feeling personally happier, but to allow one's natural compassion and wisdom to manifest.

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche again refers to the word "spiritual," which he previously defined as trying to understand what is actually true, and not just how things seem. Here he gives a more conventional definition of spirituality: "directing or steering our mind toward something good, something noble." What is the connection between these two definitions?

How things actually are, as we have read, is that they are more transient and less solidly real than we are used to accepting. What keeps us from being calm is the seemingly irresistible need to react to what is going on around us. The more that we can allow ourselves to see things around us as passing and impermanent, the less seriously we need to take them. One example of this is to think of something that has recently upset you. Then think about what you might have been upset about a year earlier. You can't even remember being upset about most things a year ago, yet when it is happening at this moment, you feel like there's no way that you are not going to be upset! Cultivating a calm mind has a lot to do with seeing that things pass, that we don't have to react so strongly to everything that happens.

The more that we can be at ease, the easier people feel around us, creating a happier environment. As Rinpoche states, we need to know that it's okay to be at ease, to let ourselves relax. In one of the most powerful paragraphs of the entire book, Rinpoche points out that we want to be happy, we want things to go well. In wanting things to go well, there is a little bit of hope and fear. We want to create wellbeing in our lives, but the way we presently go about it is to always feel slightly ill at ease. How can constantly feeling ill at ease fulfill our goal of eventually feeling calm and content?

"It's okay to relax." We may instinctively agree with this, so the

question is how do we learn to relax? If we want to be able to experience compassion and wisdom that is natural and uncontrived, it can only arise from a calm mind. An angry, irritated, or impatient person cannot convey compassion—it just can't happen. As we begin to practice meditation, we can feel some of our immediate impatience and anger begin to fall away. When they later arise during our daily lives, we can see them coming, and begin to head them off. The calm that we are learning is the ability to insert a little space between what we see or hear and how we react. However, this is just a relative improvement. As Rinpoche points out, if we want to be completely relaxed, we need to rest "in a way that is beyond thinking, beyond concepts—and yet aware." Again, he is coming back to the main point of the book, that there is a quality of mind that allows for the experience of profound compassion and wisdom, without effort. Our unimpeded mind is called "unconditioned suchness." The forming of concepts prevents us from experiencing our mind in this way. This is called "obscured suchness." What we are aiming for is "unobscured suchness," our natural state of mind.

Rinpoche points out that there are many ways to relax and feel calm, such as when a bear is in hibernation, or we are half-asleep on a couch, but this is not what he means. What he is talking about is a completely calm, yet lucid state of mind, untainted by clinging to thoughts. All you have to do to achieve this state of mind is stop clinging to your thoughts, and remain aware. This is so simple that it is actually quite difficult to do. How can we recognize when we are remaining aware without thoughts? What would that feel like? What if we have the thought, "I'm aware." Rinpoche mentions that the tradition that teaches students how to accomplish this practice is called "Dzogchen" in Tibetan Buddhism. There are many texts that describe how to practice in this way, and the benefits of doing so, and yet, in the end, the experience of resting and recognizing one's own mind nature, one's innate suchness, will require personal instructions from a qualified teacher. There's just no other way to confirm such a subtle and important state of mind without direct instructions from someone who has mastered this form of practice.



The instructions that Rinpoche gives in this book will enable the reader to go a long way towards cultivating calm and compassion, and all of this preparation may induce someone to seek out, and be in a good position to benefit from, the instructions of a qualified teacher.

At the end of the chapter, Rinpoche introduces the concept of nonmeditation, which may sound like what most of us do all the time. But this word has a specific meaning in Tibetan Buddhist teachings. Right now, from a practitioner's point of view, our day is divided up into two periods: the time we spend meditating, and the time between our meditation sessions. Eventually, however, our mind can become so stable in resting in thought-free awareness that we carry on our lives in this state, no longer sitting down to meditate and then finishing, but remaining in thought-free awareness throughout the day. Since we are no longer sitting down to meditate, and then finishing, this state of mind is called "nonmeditation." As Rinpoche states, "It is the quintessence of a calm mental state," and the highest form of spiritual practice.

TO CONTEMPLATE:
Do we really have control over how we react to situations?

## CHAPTER 18: THE BEST POSSIBLE CARE

In this section of the book, we turn our attention gently away from our own state of mind, and we get advice on how to care for patients in specific situations, advice we can apply right away in our lives. Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche urges us to think about what it means to let go of strong emotions, such as pain and fear. He points out that the amount that we suffer from pain, fear, sadness, and so on, depends to a large degree on our mental state. If we are capable of "loosening up the rigid tendency to hold onto things, the less suffering and pain we will experience in any

situation." We may feel that letting go of pain and anguish right away is not possible, but Rinpoche gives an example of how that can happen. We may be really worried about something, so that we can't even get it off our mind for a second. Then a phone call may come with news about something even more worrisome, and the first event may go completely out of our mind. How does that happen?

As Rinpoche has pointed out throughout the book, what gives thoughts and emotions their power over us is how much we cling to that thought. Clinging is another way of saying "focusing on." The more we focus on our pain, the more suffering we experience. The more we can let it go, even just a little bit, the less that we experience the whole situation as painful. We've all seen this many times. There may be a patient with a severe injury who appears to be able to shrug it off by saying, "These things happen," or we may see a patient with a very small injury who is overwhelmed by a minor pain because his or her life already feels out of control. Cultivating a calm mind means not just being able to relax when things are going well, but developing the habit of staying calm even in difficult situations.

How can our learning to cultivate a calm mind help the people that we care for? We would like to be able to encourage the people we care for to similarly be able to decrease their clinging a little bit, in order to make their situation more tolerable. However, it would be difficult for us to help them convincingly if we have never been able to do this for ourselves. As health professionals, we are often in the position of giving advice to patients that we don't do ourselves, such as losing weight, taking blood pressure medication, getting flu shots, or trying to tell them to relax and not worry so much. The more that we can give patients advice from a genuine position of knowing that the advice can be helpful, the more likely it is to benefit the patient. The genuineness with which we give advice is the key point. Just as we would have difficulty learning to meditate from a teacher who has not learned himself, we can't expect patients to take our advice to heart if we have not proven to ourselves that it can be valuable.



Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche then goes on to advise us to take care of all our patients in the same kind and caring way, whether they are young or old, whether they will recover from their illness or not. He has already taught us about impermanence, the fact that everything changes in life, and that all beings must eventually die. If we have been able to take these teachings on impermanence to heart, we can care for everyone with an attitude towards relieving their suffering, no matter what situation they find themselves in. This is in contrast to our current medical model that focuses more on patients that can be cured than on those who are in the process of dying. He encourages us to treat everyone with a kind attitude, with a loving gaze, and with comforting words. We need to ask ourselves, why is it so difficult to express these feelings to our patients? What are the obstacles to expressing a kind and caring attitude to everyone under our care? Wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to offer this kind of attitude to everyone we meet?

Our natural compassion and wisdom are already there. By practicing in the ways that are outlined in the book, we can cultivate this capability. That's what "medicine and compassion" really means.

TO CONTEMPLATE:
What prevents us from expressing a genuine kind and caring attitude to patients, or anyone that we care for?

# CHAPTER 19: COPING WITH DIFFICULT PATIENTS AND SITUATIONS

As Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche says, "It's always easier to be kind to a person that you know and care about." Taking care of patients who actively appreciate you, follow your directions, and smile when you come in, can make you feel that you are truly a compassionate

doctor or nurse. We may think, "If only all our patients were like this I wouldn't have much trouble being compassionate all the time!" However, as we all know, not all patients are like this. Patients can refuse to follow directions, lose their temper, say bad things, and make it difficult to care for them. These are the patients that test our compassion and wisdom. They can even make us reconsider our career choice.

Rinpoche, however, urges us to see these patients "as a special opportunity to generate compassion." If you recall, spiritual practitioners need sentient beings in order to practice compassion, and doctors and nurses need sick patients in order to practice healing. Difficult patients allow us to measure how far our training in compassion has taken us. As Rinpoche states, "If you discover that you feel no resentment or resistance at all in dealing with [a very difficult patient], then you can take it as a sure sign that you have already achieved very good results in training in compassion!"

By recognizing that the difficult patient is disturbed, unable to handle what is going on, or has had a difficult life all along, we can use the opportunity to consciously try to express more compassion, and to demonstrate kindness, even in the face of anger. The best way to do this is to not take it personally, to recognize that the patient is the one who is out of control, and to try to use all our skill to help them relax, to have a chance to behave better. "Patience is like an armor, and the stronger your compassion, the stronger the armor." The armor doesn't keep you from feeling the pain that the patient is going through, but it prevents you from being disturbed by it. It allows us to approach that patient with a sense of being protected from becoming upset by how they are acting. What does the armor consist of? It is a combination of compassion—our desire to help the patient even if they are being difficult—and wisdom, which recognizes that they are not really in control of their own emotions. We need to apply all of our skills to try to help them feel more comfortable without taking it personally.

Sir William Osler is well known for having promoted the quality of "equanimity" in physicians, which has often been interpreted as meaning not showing your true emotions. Keeping an even keel is certainly important in practicing medicine, but if our way of doing this is to deny our feelings, and hiding our emotions, we won't be as good at comforting patients, and we may end up feeling exhausted from trying to keep our emotions constantly in check. What Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche is talking about is cultivating true equanimity, not the appearance of equanimity. However, one of the reasons that health professionals develop an attitude of detachment is because taking care of patients in painful and difficult circumstances is difficult. Since we don't know how to maintain a calm mind in difficult circumstances, we develop ways to detach ourselves from those circumstances. This would be an acceptable technique if it weren't for the fact that patients can sense that detachment, and interpret it is as a lack of genuine compassion.

At this point, we might start to feel like we are being asked to sacrifice ourselves for the care of the patient. Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche reassures us that it is okay to protect your own sense of wellbeing after you feel like you have tried your best. He describes this as maintaining your own balance. He gives several examples in which finding the right balance makes things better, from filling a glass of water to brewing a perfect cup of coffee. He acknowledges how difficult it can be to maintain a compassionate attitude, and remaining compassion based solely on will power will ultimately wear you down. That's why the insight that Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche is sharing is so key: the goal is to allow our natural compassion to emerge, a situation that gradually relies less on will power, and more on how we can genuinely be. In this way we can take on difficult patients without the anxiety and irritability that often accompanies this situation. We can don a true armor of patience that will protect us, and allow us to continue to help our patients throughout the day.

What if, despite our best efforts, we are not able to save a patient? How do we feel? Rinpoche points out that we should always do our best for patients, using our body, speech, and mind on their behalf, the best we can. We need to know that our efforts didn't fail because we didn't try to help, but because we couldn't help. As Rinpoche said earlier in

the book, some diseases are curable, and some are not. As long as we feel that we tried our best, we shouldn't feel that we have let someone down. "Being incapable of saving people is the nature of things." It's okay to feel sad, but he points out that we can also rejoice a little bit, knowing that we were able to do our best for them. This may result in a bittersweet feeling: sad because they were unable to be saved, gratified that you were able to help them as much as you could. Even when the patient is a child, we can try to maintain this same attitude of helping as much as we can, even if we can't change the outcome.

TO CONTEMPLATE:
Think about how you can find the balance between trying as hard as you can, and feeling comfortable setting limits for yourself.

# CHAPTER 20: EASING THE PROCESS OF DYING

This next chapter carries on from the last chapter, expanding the discussion on how to help patients that we know are in the process of dying. Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche starts out by reminding us to contemplate impermanence. He suggests that we think about it deeply, not just as an intellectual idea, but as something that truly governs all that takes place, recognizing that nothing can stay the same, not even our human bodies.

What is the purpose of cultivating this deeper understanding impermanence? It's to understand that things really do change—that it's not in the nature of things for anything to stay the same. Rinpoche reminds us that the fact of impermanence is not just "some idea the Buddha had." No matter how we search, or how we view the world, everything is impermanent. He goes on to describe four major examples of impermanence, to help us understand the point more deeply.



Anything that has been constructed, or manufactured, will eventually fall apart. This is only a matter of time. Whatever we gather together, in terms of household goods, money, reputation, or power, will all get used up, or get dispersed. Entire cities and civilizations, with vast connections and massive amounts of wealth, have disappeared, their ancient buildings buried beneath sand or dirt. We shouldn't think of our current civilization as being any different. All the people that we meet will eventually disappear from our lives. There are temporary partings, and permanent partings.

Particularly appropriate to this chapter, Rinpoche points out the fourth example: birth ends in death. Although we often look at the reasons that someone has to die—through illness, old age, accident, earthquakes, weather, murder, or war—we need to understand that birth is the actual cause of death. Once we are born, there is no alternative but to have to die someday. We also need to know that there is no guarantee that we get to grow up, or that we live to a certain age. Everything is impermanent.

We may be thinking to ourselves, "Okay, I get it. Things are impermanent. If we can't do anything about it, why think about it so much?" Because, Rinpoche says, it allows us to accept, on a deep level, that things do undergo constant change: "The time spent contemplating and studying impermanence prepares us to accept that the body dies. It's just a natural consequence of being alive." You may notice that he carefully states that "the body dies," which is compatible with the Buddhist belief that the mind continues to exist after the death of the body. Although Rinpoche has not stressed Buddhist beliefs very much in this book, it may help, at this point, to recognize that the rest of the discussion on dying, and dying with dignity, involves trying to cultivate some confidence about what happens after we die, so that we don't enter that process with a lot of fear and uncertainty. This is a chance for each of us to reflect on what we believe, and try to come to a personal understanding of what might be likely. Every religion believes that a form of awareness carries on after death. It's actually only a small minority of people in the world who believe that since our brain must create consciousness, our awareness must end permanently at death. As you reflect on these ideas, remind yourself that all of these views are

just beliefs at this point. In the absence of proof either way, believing that awareness carries on is no different than believing that it doesn't. One is not more "scientific" or valid than the other.

It may be helpful to contemplate a further point. Is it possible that whatever happens to one person is the same that happens to all people? If our consciousness ends with death, then that should be true for all humans, and not just for those who believe that we don't carry on. If our awareness continues after death, then this would be true for all people, and not just believers. If our mind can never be created or destroyed, but carries on from incarnation to incarnation based on our actions, that should be true for all beings, and not just for Buddhists. Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche did not raise these points in the book, but thinking about dying in this way can be valuable, and lead to some interesting discussions among friends. However, it may also lead us to think more clearly about what we might be facing when we die.

For the health practitioner, having confidence about what happens when someone dies can make us more comfortable when we are trying to comfort a dying patient. Even if we don't have any real confidence in what happens after we die, there is still one common thing that all patients face. We all have to learn how to let go of things in this life. There's no doubt, regardless of where we might end up, that we will need to leave behind everything that we care about, our unforgiven grudges, our losses and triumphs, our loved ones, and all our possessions. Trying to cling to these things as we die can be very painful.

The role of the health practitioner in this situation is tricky, as Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche spends several pages pointing out. We want to initially inspire hope, to help the patient feel like they can get better. Only when it is clear that there finally is no hope should we turn our attention to helping them with the dying process. To do this, we need to first work with the patient's own beliefs. Do they have a strong belief as to what will happen to them? Are they frightened? Are they a Buddhist practitioner?

We should try to work with their beliefs if we can. If the patient appears to get comfort from what they believe, that can be very helpful.



However, regardless of their beliefs we can gently encourage people to let go of whatever it is that is bothering them, holding them back, making things more painful. One has to be very careful to do this in a gentle and compassionate way. One can't just walk in and say, "Now you are going to die, best if you give up thinking about your family and friends!" That's why it is important for the health professional to have thought about this deeply themselves, to develop a sense of how they would approach this if it were happening to them, what they would want to hear. This is a skill that a health professional can cultivate, and can be of great value in helping to ease suffering at the end of life. Our skill is aimed at helping the patient let go, to release all of their attachments gradually, so that they can die at peace. So they can die, as Rinpoche says, skillfully.

TO CONTEMPLATE:
Is what happens after we die likely to be the same for all human beings, regardless of belief?

# CHAPTER 21: THE TRUE MEANING OF DEATH WITH DIGNITY

The topic of dying is so important, particularly if we are determined to compassionately help all our patients, that Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche devotes still another chapter to it, this time to give us the spiritual practitioner's view of death. He encourages us to contemplate the next step: going beyond just thinking about dying without fear, to actually facing death with a positive attitude. How can that be possible?

As mentioned earlier, one of the biggest obstacles to dying without fear is lacking confidence in what is going to happen. Since few readers will be familiar with the detailed teachings about this in the Buddhist tradition, Rinpoche presents a brief overview of what the Buddhist practitioner expects to encounter when he or she dies, and the opportunities that can

arise in this situation. Knowing what is going to happen after you die, and feeling that you have prepared for this as much as you can while you are alive can give you a sense of confidence, just as if you were facing a difficult journey for which you have made good preparations.

In Tibetan Buddhist teachings, our awareness is a continuity that transcends birth and death. This cycle of existence is divided into four transition periods, called bardos. These four bardos are: the bardo of birth and living; the bardo of dying; the luminous bardo of our innate nature; and the karmic bardo of becoming. There are specific teachings, or instructions that accompany each phase. In the bardo of dying there are descriptions of what our body experiences as it begins to die; becoming aware of this progression can make us more comfortable when confronting our own death, or make us more able reassure dying patients about what they are going through.

When we breathe our last breath, it is said that we "faint," or lose awareness for a short time. When we awaken, we are exposed briefly to our innate nature of mind. Knowing how to recognize this moment after we die is the goal of all our meditation practice. If we are fortunate enough to have our mind nature pointed out to us while we are living, and we practice in this fashion, then we will be able to quickly recognize our mind nature when we see it after we die. If we have accustomed ourselves to our mind nature in the same way that a child knows how to recognize its mother, we will have no difficulty connecting with this after death. At that moment, we can attain liberation from birth and death, and attain complete enlightenment.

This rare window of opportunity is something that many people who are interested in Buddhism never hear about. However, if we have been able to practice meditation during our lifetime, and have some confidence in our practice, then we can face this transition with a positive attitude, knowing that we have a great spiritual opportunity. This is what Rinpoche is referring to when he talks about the meaning of death with dignity—instead of approaching our death with fear and a terrible sense of loss, we approach it with a sense of confidence and opportunity.



If we are unable to recognize our mind nature at that exact moment, we will begin to undergo a series of experiences, as Rinpoche describes. During this period of time we can try to remind ourselves that everything we are going through is just happening in our own mind, and if we can remember how to meditate, we can again have a chance to steer our consciousness toward a favorable rebirth, which would mean a circumstance in which we could again experience Buddhist teachings and have an opportunity to practice.

In order to have a chance to die in a dignified manner, we need to practice during our lives. Rinpoche gives an inspiring definition of dignity: "self-respect, appreciation, and confidence." It would change our whole attitude towards death and dying if we could cultivate the confidence to approach death with dignity. Our confidence could then help our dying patients, even if they have completely different beliefs, by being able to be more straightforward in dealing with this inevitable portion of our lives.

TO CONTEMPLATE:
What would make you more confident about facing your own death? How could this confidence help your patients?

# CHAPTER 22: TIBETAN MEDICINE

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche finishes the book with a description of the Tibetan form of medicine, a tradition that was initially taught at the time of the Buddha, and has been maintained mainly through the monastic system. Tibetan doctors were the products of monastery training, whether they took vows or not. As such, they studied meditation, and trained in compassion along with their studies in diagnosis and treatment. As Rinpoche points out in this chapter, Tibetan medicine is based on the belief that most illness stems from

imbalances in the body or mind, and that bringing these factors back into balance is the way to affect a cure.

The chapter is easy to read, and it's not necessary to reiterate what he has said. However, it is worth pointing out a few things. Tibetan medicine is based on a more subtle form of diagnosis because there was no technology in Tibet during the thousand years that Buddhism flourished there. Tibetan doctors became adept at detecting subtle pulses at the wrist that reflected disease processes in other parts of the body. They feel the radial pulse on both wrists, but they don't just count the heartbeat. Using three fingers, they are able to detect six subtle pulsations in the body that reflect the underlying condition of the patient. As Rinpoche mentions, the Tibetan doctor doesn't start with a history of the present illness, but goes straight to taking the pulse. A good doctor is able to tell the patient why he or she came in, rather than the patient having to explain their symptoms to the doctor. After asking the patient if this is indeed why they came in, they then they can discuss factors that may have led to this condition.

Modern Western medicine is often skeptical of other traditions, mainly because they appear to be subjective, not amenable to confirmation with machines, and not able to be tested with randomized, controlled trials. Nonetheless, Tibetan medicine has been preserved and passed down for twenty-five hundred years, so it is reasonable to assume that it must have some benefit, or no one would have bothered to preserve it for so long. The illnesses that Tibetans seek treatment for are often subtle, involving a slight feeling of anxiety, or difficulty sleeping, or a variety of aches and pains. Tibetan medicine approaches these symptoms as a valid indication of an imbalance, and usually can make people feel better. Treatment can often be combined with spiritual practice, either by asking lamas to perform ceremonies, or recommending that the patients themselves do some spiritual practice. In the modern age, Tibetans do not rely only on Tibetan medicine alone to help them—they will seek out whatever care is likely to make them better.

After this description, Rinpoche makes the key point that doctors in Tibet were judged specifically on their compassion, as it was felt that a compassionate doctor could be more effective. This is a fitting observation to include in a book on medicine and compassion. Whatever form of healing we apply, it is likely to be more effective if we cultivate a kind and compassionate manner, if we focus on not only the physical symptoms, but also try to relieve the mental suffering that almost all patients experience. Because of impermanence, all people fall ill at some point, and eventually all beings have to die. Our role as physicians and nurses is to help ease the suffering involved, just as we would want others to relieve our suffering. Rinpoche calls "the will to ease suffering" a noble resolve, and states that possessing a noble heart is the most important principle in healing. If we truly take this book to heart, we will likely agree with him, and be able to bring a whole new level of compassion and problem-solving to help our patients, and all beings who suffer.

TO CONTEMPLATE:

Now that the book is finished, think about how cultivating a genuine compassionate attitude can help the people you care for, and help yourself provide care with less effort. What does it mean to have a genuinely compassionate attitude?

# RESOURCES

If we could automatically increase our capacity for compassion just by wishing to do so, it is likely that we would have done so a long time ago. As this has not happened, we probably need some help. If this book inspires you to try to obtain teachings from Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche in person, he teaches in Kathmandu, and in his own retreat centers around the world. He gives an annual seminar every year at his monastery in Boudhanath, near Kathmandu, usually in November. You can find information on this and other activities at www.shedrub.org. To find links to his retreat centers in California, Denmark, Austria, Russia, Scotland, or England, search "gomde" and the country you are interested in.

*Medicine and Compassion* has been translated into German, Italian, Spanish, and Catalan.

For those with a deeper interest in Buddhist philosophy, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche has established a fully accredited university curriculum in Buddhist studies at his monastery in Kathmandu, designed specifically for foreigners to be able to study Buddhist philosophy in depth, and to learn Tibetan. For more information on this, and short-term courses that are offered, go to www.ryi.org.

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*Medicine and Compassion* is part of a long-term project by Dr. Shlim and Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche to help establish the idea that compassion can be trained in and made more effortless, with great benefits to both patient and caregiver. To stay in touch with this project, and to find out about future learning opportunities, you can visit the Medicine and Compassion website: www.medicineandcompassion.com.