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VAJRA REGENT ÖSEL TENDZIN  
Public Seminar: The Wheel of Life

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VAJRA REGENT ÖSEL TENDZIN: Good evening, everyone. I apologize for the lateness of the hour, or the lateness of my arrival, I should say. The lateness of the hour is due to some kind of time change [referring to Daylight Savings Time], which I was neglecting, which is very interesting. We think we have a lot of time; it turns out we don't.

The teaching of the bhavachakra is important to us because, by studying the origins of suffering, the creation of habitual patterns and the continuation of misery, we begin to get some idea of how completely thick and solid the world of confusion is. The whole point in presenting these teachings as the Buddha presented them is to connect with what actually happens in our life, how we continue to perpetuate ego's game. We are travelers. We are those who have embarked on a journey. Having done so, we need a good map: we need to know the landscape, what dangers there are, what hazards there are, what obstacles. We need a good guide as well. And that is why Buddha taught this particular teaching. Because it is a practical guide, it was charted, walked on, experienced by those who came before us, and written down, explained thoroughly, and presented to us, and we continue to present it.

But what is the purpose of studying this? It is simply that, knowing the, understanding the origin of suffering, understanding suffering, the origin of suffering, we also can understand the end of suffering, or the cessation of suffering. Why so? Because we can take the mystery, the confusion out of it, by seeing the whole thing properly. So what we have talked about the past three days, four days—I don't know what you talked about yesterday, but I can imagine—we talked about suffering and its origin, and now we should talk about the end of suffering, or the cessation of suffering, and how to go about that, which I suppose is not going to be a surprise to anybody. On the other hand, presenting the teachings again and again is not like serving up old food, but it is more like handing down the recipe and preparing a feast, preparing a simple feast with accuracy, so that everyone can continually take part and enjoy the whole process.

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So we talk about, as the Buddha did, the cessation of suffering, that there is that possibility, is the proclamation of the truth, the proclamation of the teaching: there is the possibility that this whole confusion that we've been talking about is not necessary. So what we are about, at this point, is preventing the chain reaction, which we talked about last time, from occurring, preventing that chain reaction of karmic process from occurring, and actually preventing it.

And the key to preventing that chain reaction from occurring is the development of discipline, which actually goes against the grain, in terms of the neurotic world that we are accustomed to, the haphazard world we are accustomed to. There is only one way to cut those neurotic patterns of chain reaction, and that is discipline, and the discipline we are talking about is, of course, the practice of meditation. But the notion of discipline is what arises from having heard this teaching of the wheel of life. What other way? We can't figure out any trick, particularly, of how to take the steam out of our passion, our aggression, our ignorance. We try so hard to figure out some trick to take the steam out, so our ultimate goal is to do the whole thing without feeling bad. But it doesn't work because inherent in feeling bad is a karmic seed.

So we have to become disciplined, which means making a real connection with that whole process of birth of ego and its continuation and its habitual pattern. Making a connection with it, and that is, seeing the whole thing from beginning to end, properly. And that is done, as you know, or as you may not know, through the practice of sitting meditation, which involves simply not taking part in the whole process. Not taking part in the continual birth and rebirth, birth and rebirth, of passion, aggression and ignorance, by doing nothing. Not taking part in the samsaric world. Well, it sounds very orthodox and maybe too simplistic, but it is true that that is the only way to begin. No tricks. You begin by not feeding the fire.

You see, that comes out of just hearing the teaching. Hearing the teaching connects with your life, and you realize you have been doing this thing, and you feel pretty miserable about it. And you feel constantly, two, three, four, five, ten people, all the time. How many? We don't know. At the same time, we have some inkling that this world, and our minds together, are very simple and very direct, but that nagging feeling of perpetuating, and not being able to get out of it, goes on. So hearing the teaching, you realize, it connects, and that's actually what happens. So what to do? Don't continue it any more, don't feed it. How not to feed it? Well, the simplest way has been taught by the Buddha, and that is the practice of shamatha, the realization of shamatha.

So the whole point, friends, is not giving in to that process, and that takes discipline, not giving in to your continual nagging mind, that nagging mind that would like to keep you always in a muddle, always confused. You know, when we talk about how difficult it is to practice, and how it takes us such a hard time, we have such a hard time to get to the shrine hall, to get to do our so-called requirements, and all the rest of it. Now what in the world are we talking about? Are these requirements part of samsara? Have you ever thought about that? Is your sitting practice part of samsara? You approach it that way, we approach it that way. "It's so difficult to get there." "I have to struggle to get there." That's why the teachings become important, that's why you should understand, study these teachings.

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Having practiced sitting meditation, we begin to feel that it is possible to actually cut off the whole karmic chain. And that happens when we become familiar with not giving in. When we become familiar with not giving in to habitual patterns, then we begin to feel confident, we begin to feel healthy, that it's not necessary to go on like that, absolutely not. We can sit and be dignified, be worthwhile to ourselves, at least.

And that leads to the notion of discipline in our lives, that is, meditation in action. That first of all, we recognize the possibility of the absence of confusion by our sitting practice. Then we go out further in our lives and notice all that confusion so-called "out there" - how to deal with that. We can't do it that way. What we have to do is seal our lives with practice. You see, you can't sit and then go out and try to carry sitting practice with you. And somehow you think your provisions are going to be enough to keep you sane. And you open up your bag and there's nothing in it. So how do we actually do that? How do we actually carry it out further? We carry it out further by simply sealing our waking and sleeping with practice, like sealing. Do you understand? Containing the whole thing. Starts with practice, ends with practice. It's again a very simplistic notion, but it actually works.

When you begin to feel at home with your practice, in other words, your sitting practice feels like the most natural thing, the most intimate thing that ever occurred—when that happens, when you feel a certain simplicity about your life, looking around, it doesn't look so complicated anymore. Why is that? Because the whole production that we've been talking about all this time begins to diffuse, begins to lose its potency, and things begin to become simple. You realize that you can lead a very ordinary, simple life: getting up, eating, working, talking to people, doesn't have to be full of discursive thought, doesn't have to be garbage, particularly. It can be very simple, very clean, very straightforward. Practice does that. Sealing your life with practice does that, brings that about, that realization of simplicity, that things are not all that complicated. They're very straightforward, after all, very simple.

What an interesting idea, that life could be uncomplicated. The whole thing, our whole experience of perception, our whole notion of who we are and what the world is could be uncomplicated, simple; a simple statement. We're not talking about good and bad here; that's not the point, good and bad. Just simple statement, simple life. When we begin to realize for ourselves that this simplicity we're talking about is not produced from anything, it's just simply what it is, then at that point, the whole notion of arising starts to fade away. The whole notion of arising of this whole wheel of life that we talked about starts to fade away. We become simple people, a simple person in the world.

Maybe a boring person; maybe nobody's interested. Maybe we're not interested. Maybe we're not interested in samsara's games. Maybe we stop playing games, completely. We hear our footsteps as we walk, we see our shadow on the pavement, and it's a simple event. It's not complicated; it's certainly not philosophical. We don't hear some kind of concerto every time we walk down the street, say, "Isn't that wonderful, the leaves are blowing and ... this must be because..." We don't say that any more. We just, here we are. Very simple. When that occurs, we actually have accomplished some sort of cessation of suffering, and cessation of that karmic propensity. We become simple people, simply what we are.

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But further than that, we realize that that simplicity, and that cessation doesn't belong to anybody, including ourselves, and that's a really interesting point. That's a further subtlety on the simplicity, and that it doesn't belong to us, or anybody. It's simple by itself. At that point we actually begin to change our attitude. We become Buddhist. In the full sense of the word we become Buddhist. That even the end of suffering is not a personal matter, at all. It has nothing to do with us personally. It just simply is the fact. When that occurs, then we develop some sense of realization of the teachings, and we become in tune with the buddhadharma. We know how suffering arises, how it continues, and we know why practice is necessary. We begin to develop some kind of sharpness, some kind of clarity. We begin to actually understand dharma, and our minds become keen, and clean and sharp. We realize that in dharma, what we have been hearing, or what we have been practicing, is so potent and necessary, and then we begin to appreciate it.

When we appreciate it, at that point we finally become decent people, decent human beings. We're no longer aggressive. Simple, decent human beings. We no longer would like to cause a problem for anybody. We just experience our lives, good or bad. Experience our lives in an upright fashion, a decent fashion. When we actually understand dharma, we realize there's no problem. And the whole notion of *klesha*, the whole experience of the arising of emotion, and hot and cold, all the rest of it, begins to actually subside, and we realize that there is no problem. Then we become decent people. There are no real hang-ups, psychologically, shall we say. But there's no real Freudian slip. There isn't any. Do you believe? There's no Freudian slip. [Laughs] We don't have to analyze. We realize there's actually no problem. There's clean thread. So we could lead our lives very simply.

If you have any questions, we could have a discussion at this point.

QUESTION: I'm nervous.

VR: [Inaudible]

Q: Because the last time I asked you a question, it was interesting. You probably don't remember. [Laughter] You made me say my name about ten times.

VR: Did I?

Q: Yes.

VR: Oh, my goodness.

Q: Anyways...

VR: What is your name, by the way?

Q: I changed it since then. [Laughter]

VR: Well, all the better to say it again. What is it?

Q: It was Betraino.

VR: And now it's ...

Q: Merrill. It was my married name. I changed it back to my maiden name.

VR: Back to Merrill, yes. Well, Merilee. Let's go along.

Q: Okay. That keenness, what you were talking about a minute ago, when one begins to let go and to feel that space that occurs, when you are able to cut through, you know, your habitual patterns. With me I find that at times it becomes—the keenness, the sharpness, the warmth—pretty overwhelming at times.

VR: Uh-huh.

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Q: And I'm wondering about that, I'm wondering do I become, do I feel overwhelmed by that because it's still so new to me, you know, that I'm still not quite sure about it, you know. I want to let go, cut through the habitual patterns, and yet somehow, it seems like...

VR: I think we have a problem with the metaphor. Letting go, and cutting through habitual patterns doesn't quite work.

Q: Well, let's take away the letting go part.

VR: Good. What you going to put in its place?

Q: Basically, just what happens, what you were talking about earlier through practice of meditation. The more and more you practice, the more you relate to your habitual ways, your habitual patterns, the more you begin to see it, and understand it, yet at the same time, develop a friendship towards it. Actually, I'm sort of getting off the track here.

VR: I think so. Forget the friendship, forget the letting go. Okay? There's habitual patterns, and there's practice. Okay, so the more you see it, what?

Q: Well, the more, from my personal point of view, the more I see it, and actually connect with it, that's what I'm trying to, connection. That means more to me than the letting go. The more I seem to connect with it, the more, it doesn't seem to be a big deal any more, and yet I think I'm still skeptical of it. And what I was saying before is I'm wondering is that because my connection with it is still a little too new?

VR: I don't think so. I think basically-

Q: Or is it because of my skepticism about it?

VR: No...

Q: Wanting to...

VR: No, the skepticism is just another thought, you know. The whole idea is sealing, sealing your whole life with practice, beginning and end. That's just basically it.

Q: You're right. It is just another thought.

VR: I don't know whether I'm right or what, but-

Q: Well, I can picture myself in situations at times where, you know, I felt a tremendous amount of clarity or warmth, and yet somewhere back there is this-

VR: Well, you know what? Look. What we are talking about is forget the tremendous amount, forget the clarity, forget the warmth and the whole thing. You see, we're practitioners here at Karma Dzong, right? And we're talking about how to practice buddhadharma. How to actually cut the root of suffering, okay?

Discipline and practice should be the bookends of our experience. Should be our shoes. You know how you feel in your shoes? Sometimes they're too tight, sometimes they're too loose, but you walk in them. That's the whole notion of what we're doing here, all of us, and that's how we should be. We put on the shoes of practice of buddhadharma, and we walk in those shoes. We tie them, you see? You tie your shoes-well, maybe you don't, you strap them. Even if they're loafers, you put them on. Whatever it is, you know. [Laughter] If they're open toes, still they have something across. You know, if you have shoes, something is binding.

Something is holding the whole thing together. That's practice. And basically forget about the whole business of your mind and what you think. Just get yourself down to the whole notion of being grounded in practice. If you can do that, then you start

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to develop some kind of simplicity. Then you have this humor about the problem. But before that you don't have any humor about the problem, because it always comes up, you know?

Q: Well, it's probably always going to keep coming up, right?

VR: Mmm-mmm. Otherwise Buddha was lying. [Laughter]

Q: I guess I'm afraid of that point in time-

VR: Yes, everybody's afraid of that! Everybody here. Who wants to lose the problem? [Laughter] What would we have to do after that? Nothing much.

Q: [Inaudible]

VR: Just be decent, that's all. After the problem's gone, we're just decent. Just simple human beings.

QUESTION: I'm still having trouble with the concept of sealing one's life with meditation practice. When you first said that, the first thing I thought of was like sealing wax.

VR: In the beginning, when you get up, meditate. When you go to bed, you meditate. In the beginning, in the morning, and at night.

Q: But is it a kind of sealing off from, or...?

VR: It's a sealing. Seal. Stamps. The whole notion of being with egolessness. What I'm simply saying is practice when you get up, practice when you go to bed, practice in the middle. I mean, that's sealing, you see. It's very-what I'm talking about is a practical matter. When you get up in the morning, before you go to work, sit. Before you go to bed, sit. That seals the whole life. Does that make any sense to you?

Q: More.

VR: Yes. Beyond the psychological thing, I'm talking about sitting in the morning and sitting in the evening.

Q: Okay.

VR: How about that? [Laughter] Oh, you have your own [referring to microphone].

QUESTION: Really. I'd like to go back to question about earlier talk, and that is the notion of death in relation to the wheel of life. We have Yama, which is part of our projection. In a sense, we're sealed by Yama, you know, the claws and the teeth, everything. And we have Yamantaka, which is sort of the conqueror, the death of death, the conqueror of the Lord of Death. And I'm a little confused how do those two principles really relate to each other?

VR: Sure. Absolutely. That's what we're talking about tonight. Cessation of suffering is Yamantaka. Suffering is definitely Yama.

Q: So Yamantaka is in some sense the realization of some kind of truth.

VR: What kind of truth? You tell me, come on. Simply from what we've been talking about.

Q: Truth of seeing bewilderment and confusion for what it is.

VR: That's right.

Q: The truth of the space that surrounds the wheel.

VR: No, no. Forget that.

Q: Okay.

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VR: Forget that. You see, we'd love to go off on the picnic. [Laughter] You said it right the first time. See? You see, you read a lot of books, and it says a lot of space, and people around here say space, and all that stuff.

Q: But you say it.

VR: But listen, listen to me, listen to me, I say it, yes. But listen to me, if you understand these teachings that we've been talking about, if you understand these teachings and practice this way, then your whole journey will be pretty much open to you. That's the problem so much is we'd like to complicate things, and add a lot of things, you know. But seeing confusion for what it is, that's great. What's your name?

Q: Jim Knight.

VR: How long have you been sitting?

Q: Two years. Three years, actually.

VR: Here?

Q: Yes.

VR: Uh huh. Who's your meditation instructor?

Q: Jim Yensan.

VR: That's good. Okay.

QUESTION: The way I heard you end, you said there is a clean thread?

VR: Mmm-hmm.

Q: What is that?

VR: A clean thread, what is that? I don't know. What do you think it is? You think it's some kind of mystic cord or something? [Laughter; laughs]

Q: I don't know what it is.

VR: Well, it isn't anything. Come on. It's kind of a, awareness. Mindfulness, awareness. That's the only clean thread.

Q: Thank you.

VR: You realize we're not talking about a thing here, you know. When we use words, we're not talking about a thread like something that goes from my head to your head or something like that. What did you think I meant?

Q: Well, I remember reading it some time before.

VR: What?

Q: There is a thread of awareness or something.

VR: That's right, awareness, awareness. Thread is just a common term in Buddhist language. Thread. Right? Not like in Western language, you know, the thread. This kind of thread is a sense of like a chain, more than a thread, you know. When we usually think of thread, we think of something that connects one thing to the other. This kind of thread... [laughs]. Well, let's forget the whole thing, okay? [Laughter] For the time being anyway. [Laughs] Oh, I got it. [Laughter] Thread, thread. Okay. Thread is like this coat, or your coat, right? Woven, right, in order to make a coat. We look at it as one thing. Okay? Coat. We say, "Well, that's coat." But we don't see the thread, how it was sewn together to make one thing. Same things we're talking about of ego and egolessness. Egolessness is seeing the threads. The whole thing is made up of threads, but ego is just seeing it as coat. [Applause; laughs] Took some time to sew the whole thing together. Well, I think that's appropriate anyway, if you look at it that way. Even if you don't.

QUESTION: Do habitual patterns actually change, or do they just become simple?

VR: Do habitual patterns change? No. That's what means habitual. They keep on going the same way. Habitual patterns never change. They're habitual. [Laughter]

Q: In relation to us then, do we change?

VR: What do you mean? In relation to what? Habitual patterns in relationship to us?

Q: Yes.

VR: We are habitual patterns, that's what we think. So we think we change and we're doing the same thing all the time, right?

Q: Right.

VR: So we're talking about cessation of habitual patterns. Well, that only happens when there's cessation of us. Notion of yourself. That's what we've been talking about all along. Boils right down to that. It actually does boil right down to that if you practice. When you come right down to it, it's basic panic—"me"—which starts the whole thing going. So habitual patterns never change, they're habitual. That's what's called samsara. Habitual pattern.

Q: What about individual traits?

VR: There aren't any. That's part of the whole pattern of samsara. You say, your individual trait, your individual trait, a, b, c, d, e, f, g. But when you look at the whole thing, there's group neurosis, national neurosis, there's universal neurosis, the meteors are hitting the comets and flying, and stars are dying, and they're being born and you know. You know, you could take it from a shoot, a little plant, to the whole cosmos, the whole thing is habitual patterns. There isn't any individuality, see, that's the whole point. [Laughs] Oh, well. You have to practice a lot. Have you been practicing much?

Q: Just for about a year.

VR: Oh, you have to practice a lot. Have you done dathün?

Q: Not yet.

VR: Oh, please do.

Q: I'm dying to.

VR: Yes, yes. [Laughter]

Q: Thank you.

VR: You see, you have to actually, you have to realize these things yourself. It's no good me saying this stuff, you know. I mean, it's good for a point, of just departure, stepping stone, that you hear it and it sort of clicks maybe vaguely in your experience. But you have to practice. That's the way, the only way it makes sense. The only way you have realization of the whole thing. Please do dathün. RMDC is waiting.

Gentleman in the back. Oh, you have your own as well [referring to microphone].

QUESTION: Yes, I have my own also. Did you say that, a few nights ago, that mind doesn't actually exist, that it's sort of a fabrication, that we create mind?

VR: [Laughs] Yes, a mind doesn't actually exist. I wouldn't say we create mind; mind creates we, we create mind at the same time.

Q: Yes, I see what you mean by that.



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VR: That's good. [Laughter]

Q: No, that seems clear to me.

VR: That's good. Yes, okay.

Q: But what do we mean then, by mindfulness? I'm having a hard time relating those two in my mind.

VR: Mind-full-ness. Mindfulness. Is mindfulness is when you actually realize that we create mind, mind creates us. That's being mindful. That's a good point.

Q: That answers my question.

VR: That's good, yes. You did that by practicing meditation. You see the whole process: mind, me, me, mind.

Q: Thank you.

VR: Good.

QUESTION: You said about cessation that we become more simply what we are, and-

VR: Not more simply; simply.

Q: -simply what we are.

VR: Did I say, "more simply"? I might have, but let's make it simply.

Q: Simply what we are, okay. I'm a little confused about what is it that we're not. Certainly, we're-

VR: What is it we're not? We talked about it for three days. Passion, aggression and ignorance, all the six realms, twelve nidanas-that's what we're not.

Q: I still feel some confusion about that.

VR: Yes?

Q: Having a lot of trouble saying it.

VR: Well, you shouldn't make a lot of trouble about that.

Q: It's just not clear how, what I seem to be. What I see when I practice is less me than-

VR: Yes.

Q: -another kind of experience.

VR: Yes. Well, you have to practice more. It's not so easy, you know. When we talked about being disciplined and actually cutting through karmic chain reaction, we're not talking about some kind of simple notion, simple pill that you can take or anything like that. It's a very difficult thing to do. The whole thing is built up so long. How old are you?

Q: Twenty-six.

VR: As far as you know. How old are we? All of us. How old is this whole thing? How long have we been doing this? How long have we been doing this?

Q: You're asking me? [Laughter]

VR: Sure!

Q: I don't know. Long time.

VR & Q: Seems like a long time.

Q: Yes, it does.

VR: It doesn't matter how old you are, it seems like a long time. When you think about it, it seems like I've been doing this for a long time.

Q: Yes. And that seems like me.

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VR: And that seems like—that's great! Whoop! I've been doing this for a long time, and that seems like me. That's what we've been talking about. The whole seminar. I've been doing this for a long time, and that seems like me. Somebody write that down, please. [Laughter] [Addressing Michael Root] Michael, would you write that down. That's fantastic. That's the whole thing in a nutshell. And then we begin to see that "me" part is pretty tedious. And the "long time" and the "me" part is pretty tedious. You know, when you say that, it has a little bit of feeling of, "Oh, I've been doing this for a long time. And it seems like me."

Q: Yes.

VR: So ...

Q: So?

VR: So you have to practice a lot.

Q: Yes. I know.

VR: Because it's a long time to make "this", you know. It took a long, lot of, lot of pain. Lot of continual pain to make this notion of ourselves. And to undo it takes discipline, that's the whole thing. There's nothing other than that. Undo the whole nidana chain, undo the six realms, undo the kleshas, undo the basic bewilderment. Just undo the whole thing, as if you were pulling the thread on the coat, and you see how the whole thing happened, what you thought was the greatest thing you ever bought. [Laughter] It unravels, and it becomes simply thread. Simple thread. That's it. Simple thread. It's a simple thread, simple life, coat. Just practice, okay? There's no answer machine anywhere.

QUESTION: Is that fear of nonexistence something that happens moment to moment?

VR: Mm-hmm.

Q: Okay, how does one take the teachings and work with them within practice—as another thought? Or, I guess what I'm basically asking is, there's an attachment that occurs to the teachings, which seems actually to become a hindrance.

VR: That's okay. The great thing about the Buddhist teachings is like a sieve. Sieve? Rinpoche has talked about that. You put it in, it drains through. You can't hold them. So it's all right, don't worry about that. Attachment to the teachings is okay, because they're not graspable. [Laughter]

Q: Okay. You we're talking about that part of cessation is that your continuous mind happening all the time, and yet the mind perceives, understands, or somehow connects with the teaching, so...

VR: No, mind does not. Never. Forget it.

Q: Mind doesn't? It's not mind that understands the teachings?

VR: No. [Laughs]

Q: [Laughs]. I can ask what is it that does?

VR: The teachings understand mind.

Q: Ah.

VR: I mean, the whole point we're making here is that you can't do it by trying to put the blocks, square peg in a square hole. That's not the point. If you have dedication to the teachings, no matter how crazy or neurotic, if you practice the whole thing, if you really practice the whole thing, the kleshas will begin to subside, and you begin to feel at home and simple. No matter what, we go back and forth,

what we say. That's been taught from Tilopa to the present day. That's the way we practice, and that's it. So don't try too hard. But practice a lot. See what happens. I guarantee you'll understand everything.

Q: Thank you.

Well, ladies and gentlemen. Due to the lateness of the change of the hour, we should finish up our training session here. Thank you very much for your patience and your practice. And we who practice the buddhadharma, well, we shouldn't be interested so much in what we understand. That's not so important. What we realize is a little bit different than what we understand. We talked a lot about this and that, and confusion and absence of confusion, and all the rest of it. What we realize, that makes a difference, makes a difference between confusion and absence of confusion. Not what we understand, what we realize. And our whole lineage is based on that, from the time of the Buddha, who realized, he didn't just understand. If he just understood, he never could teach. He had to realize in order to teach. And so with the rest of us. Our life is not all that free and easy. Our life is very much sealed by practice. Even though you may be new or you may be old to the practice, no matter where you go, you can't get away from your own mind. You can't get away from practice at the same time. So let's make that commitment and practice that way. Thank you very much.