TIME TO CHANGE

We are all creatures of habit. We are all the creation of our upbringing, our environment and the general propaganda put out through the media, the government and through so many different avenues. Everybody has habits but some habits are good ones. If we had to start anew every time we did something, we would be extremely exhausted. Apart from anything else, we wouldn’t be able to cope with life! The fact that we have habits is how we are able to live. We know how to eat, we know how to comb our hair, we know how to shave or brush our teeth. For example, we didn’t know how to brush our teeth the first time as a child and our mother taught us and so we learnt. Then we didn’t think about it the next time. It became a habit. And everything that we do—driving cars, taking photos or working on the computer—is a habit. We would experience insufferable exhaustion if most of what we did during the day wasn’t routine and habitual.

When we talk about habits, it is of course understood that so much of what we do is something which we have already learnt before, and which has now become integrated into our bodily patterns so that the body knows what to do. It doesn’t even really need much instruction from our mind. This is not a tirade against habits -- even old ones -- but some habits are detrimental and negative; some habits are counter-productive. When we are doing something which we are very familiar with and which we know very well, if we are not careful, we become half asleep like zombies. If all our life is led on that plane, our life becomes extremely stale and boring: what we think of as dull routine. That’s one of the problems with habits. The other problem it seems, is that some of our habits are, as I have said, very detrimental. And we very rarely examine these; we rarely examine our habitual modes of thinking and responding. We say, “Oh, I am an angry person. I have always been angry since I was a kid. That’s just the way I am.” And we accept that. “When somebody annoys me, I flare up”, or “I am naturally very possessive and jealous, that’s just the way I am. I always was. Even when I was a kid, I wouldn’t let other kids play with my toys”, and so on: “I am naturally lazy”, “I am naturally whatever…..”

Usually, we think of the negative qualities. It’s interesting how we cherish our negative qualities and cling to them as though they were something precious even while they cause ourselves and others so much harm and trouble. We do this, it seems, for two reasons. One is that we are very lazy and don’t really want to change. The other more profound reason is that we identify with these qualities; we identify with our habits and think that these are “me” and that they are “mine”- - “this is who I am”-- even when these qualities are detrimental, even when they
are useless. We cling to all our faults and failings as much as to our virtues, (if not more than to our virtues) and think, “This is who I am”.

Many people, especially in the West, do not like themselves. One of the reasons we don’t like ourselves it seems, is that we identify with all the negativities within us. Even if we are not religious, we were brought up by our culture to think that somehow we are basically sinners, that we are intrinsically evil, but that we can be redeemed by something outside ourselves. And if we think that we are basically evil and inherently no good, then of course we will cling to all these qualities which seem to go along with this view of how unworthy we are. It’s an irony: this paradox that in the West, we are so enslaved with the idea of the individual, the individual’s freedom and the individual’s right to do whatever s(he) wants, yet along with this, we have an extremely low self-esteem— we think of ourselves as being so worthless, so useless and so hopeless. In the East where they are much more integrated with their families, their tribes, their caste and with their societies, and where the individual has very little room to manoeuvre, they nonetheless have a very strong sense of dignity; the lowest Indian has a sense of inner dignity even if s(he) is a beggar. So, it is an interesting paradox. I don’t know how exactly this came about, but it seems that the more we believe in the cult of the individual, the lower the sense of self-worth.

So, what can be done about that? In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition there is a lot of talk about destroying self-cherishing. Therefore sometimes, when Westerners come to the Tibetan tradition, as a first step they are presented with this teaching on destroying the ego and the sense of “me”, “mine” and “I”. This is because the Tibetans on the whole are quite well-balanced and integrated. Because they have a strong sense of self-worth, they are very proud to be Tibetans. One of the reasons they have been able to thrive so successfully as refugees is that they do not feel inferior to anyone else on earth! But when we come to a culture like ours where ironically, we have such huge egos on the one hand and very fragile psyches on the other, it’s more tricky. We appear to be more proud and superior in our attitudes than anyone else in the world, but it’s such a fragile veneer. Underneath and inside, it’s all soft and squishy. It’s not strong and firm. People are so sensitive underneath that armour. So, sometimes hitting away at self-cherishing with a sledge hammer doesn’t work for Westerners.

In the traditional Buddhist teachings on love and kindness, thoughts of ‘may all beings be well and happy’ are sent out in all directions. In some methods these loving thoughts are sent to the North, the East, the West and the South—then to all the intermediate directions and up and down. Or we start with someone we are very fond of and then extend that to people to whom we are indifferent, then to the people we don’t like and finally to the world at large. But in either case, the meditation starts with “may I be well and happy”, “may I be at peace”, because
until we have loving kindness and compassion for ourselves, we will never really have genuine loving kindness and compassion for others. We have to understand that each of us is also a sentient being. When we have love and kindness for all sentient beings, all sentient beings include oneself. And as this particular reborn being is the one we have the most responsibility for, we must have loving kindness for ourselves, which means self-acceptance. One has to accept oneself and come to peace with oneself. This is extremely important.

From the Buddhist point view, we are NOT innately sinful; we are inherently perfect, we all possess Buddha Nature. All of us have intrinsically the perfection of wisdom, compassion, purity and power. That is our true nature. Our true nature is vast like the sky. The nature of the mind is compared to the sky because the sky has no centre and no boundaries. Neither do we have centres or boundaries. That’s who we really are but our mistake is that we are identifying with the clouds in the sky. Inherently, all of us are good, all of us are absolutely sublime and beyond thought. Our mistake is that we identify ourselves only with our transitory thoughts and emotions. And some of these emotions, thoughts and feelings are negative yet we grasp onto them and think, “This is who I am.” But this is not who we are.

Often in the West, we grasp at our negative qualities and forget our positive qualities. To think of our positive qualities is regarded as pride. So we see all the darkness and zero in on this and forget all the good in ourselves. We don’t acknowledge it. Now, the good qualities in ourselves are like little sprouts and if we don’t give them the sunshine of our attention or appreciation, they wither. It doesn’t mean that we sit there thinking, “Wow, I am really great! Wasn’t that fantastic, the thing I did the other day?” It’s not like that. It’s not that kind of gross pride and arrogance. It’s an appreciation of the goodness within oneself as well as the recognition and acceptance of that which is negative. We need to get the whole picture. “Alright, so I have a bad temper but I am generous.” “OK, so I am greedy but I also like to share things with others.” “Ok, I get depressed but I do help my neighbours when they are in trouble.” Whatever it is, we all have qualities that are good as well as qualities that are bad. That’s the human condition. So, it’s important for us to really think and look at ourselves objectively and see that the qualities in us which are difficult—our anger or our depression or our greed or jealousy—are not “me” or “mine”. And because they are not “me” or “mine”, they can be changed. Anybody can change.

We have some monks in our community who are yogis, and one of these yogis is someone whom many people are most fond of because he is so lovely and sweet; just being in his presence is a joy! People say that when he was a young monk, he had such a foul temper. Overall he was quite learned, but he was very irascible and temperamental. So they said to him, “Well, there is no hope for you. You
have to become a yogi or else forget it.” So he became a yogi and he really transformed. Everybody just loved him because he was so good natured; the feeling about him was so peaceful and loving. If you looked into his eyes, they were just glowing with love and kindness. He didn’t start out that way, not in the beginning-- he started out angry, difficult and as someone most unpleasant, but he got himself together and changed. We can change. The Buddha said that if there was no possibility of changing our bad habits into good habits, he would not tell us to do so. But we can change; we don’t have to feel stuck. In fact, we are never static. Things are moving every moment. We don’t have to respond in the same old way. We can really change our responses, and if we change our responses, everything changes. You do understand that, don’t you?

From the Buddhist point of view, due to seeds which we have already planted in the past, certain things are going to be happening to us. How we respond to them is up to us -- if we respond to them in a skilful way, things go in one direction and if we respond in an unskilful way, things go in another direction. We mirror back what we are giving out. Therefore, we have a choice and we have freedom. We are not push-button machines. The more we really start to experience the moment and become present and aware in it, the more we start to wake up and stop being zombies, and the more we are able to bring in changes and more skilful responses instead of negative ones.

This is especially important in family life because people get so completely hung up in their habits that they hardly even see or hear each other anymore. They just see a picture of something they knew years ago. Sometimes, staying with families is very illuminating. I don’t have to be married, I just watch. How many families have lost communication? They are talking to each other but neither side is really hearing the other; they say one thing and come up with something else and the next thing you know, they are fighting – this happens again and again. It’s like the same movie being played over and over. I often think it would be useful to have a video secretly placed there and played over to them just so they could see and hear themselves – that tone of voice, the same old tone of voice, the same old use of expression, the same old accusations. They are caught and trapped. But it doesn’t have to be this way. We can change. In order to change, we need to start waking up. We need to be conscious of what we are doing and not remain unconscious.

So, while there are good habits which we need in order to just carry on with our lives, yet if our whole life is given over to habits of non-thinking, of just carrying on saying the same old babble, thinking the same old tired thoughts, and doing the same old thing day after day – it is no wonder we are bored. No wonder life is meaningless and dull. We are asleep. We need to wake; we need to be right here and now. We can do that. Everyone of us is perfectly capable of transforming our lives. Each one of us can transform our thoughts but no one else can do it for us.
All of us can see things about ourselves which we do not like and so we think about what we can do about them. First of all, we have to be accepting. We have to recognize what is going on in our mind. We have to recognize our emotions, both the good emotions and the bad emotions. Bad emotions are those emotions which eventually, if not at the present, bring unhappiness to ourselves and to those around us. They are like poison. They permeate everything good and poison it. In Buddhist practice, we recognise all the wrong that we have done, all the mistakes we have made and all the harmful things we have done -- we regret these and we are sorry. But after that, we rejoice in all the good in ourselves and all the good in all the other beings, because it’s important not to just get caught up in all the wrong; we also have to acknowledge and take delight in what is good. There is a difference between arrogance and confidence. Of course, prideful arrogance is poison but a kind of confidence and sense of worth are very important for any task we intend to do. Always thinking that we are worthless, stupid, ignorant and incapable is not spiritually nourishing at all.

In the Buddhist context, there are three forms of laziness. First of all, there is rank laziness. While we should get up to meditate in the morning, we can’t be bothered and turn around and go back to sleep. That’s a very obvious one. It’s just lazy laziness. Then, there is the laziness of thinking “I am unworthy and I cannot do this”; that sense of lack of confidence in thinking, “other people can meditate but I will never be able to meditate. I have never been able to do anything with my life. I will never be able to accomplish anything. Oh, when I meditate, I just get thoughts. Other people can sit in deep samadhi but I’ll never be able to do anything. I am just a stupid, worthless person, so why even bother?” The laziness that discourages us from even attempting the task. The third kind of laziness is being busy with worldly activities. That is shirking the task: “Of course, I like to meditate but I have to deal with my emails first.” The fact is that we do everything we can to run away from facing ourselves and being with ourselves. One of the ways is to make ourselves very busy - even engaging in Dharma activities. We can be very busy on virtuous things and feel very good about it and say, “I would really like to do some practice but I never have time because I am running a Dharma centre” or “I am taking care of this or I am doing that.” That is another form of laziness. We always somehow find time to eat. We always somehow find time to sleep. How is it that we never find time to just sit and look inside?

We can only change if we ourselves make the determination. No one else can do it for us. We all have things in our lives which are not the way they should be. Many of these stem from our inner attitudes, attitudes which are outdated, which don’t work, and which have never been of any use in the past. Why do we cling to them still? We know they are no use. We know if we change them, we would be much happier and freer. So why don’t we change? The inertia of our spirit is
enormous. Recently they were holding the Olympic games in Australia. Think of those athletes and what they go through to be selected for the Olympic Games. They give up everything for that: they change their diets, they go to bed early, they get up early, they exercise. All day long they are practising and everything is given up for that. They are one-pointedly focused. Nothing else in the world is more important than this sport. But for what? To win a medal. And here we are offering enlightenment which will last forever and with the ability to benefit infinite beings throughout time, yet if I said, “get up half an hour earlier to practice”, “Oh, I don’t know about that. That’s a bit difficult. I’m not an early morning person.” We are lazy.

We say we want to be spiritually realized but only if somebody comes along and gives it to us. Some great guru has just to say the word, “Zap” and we are instantly realized – how very nice. But each one of us has to do the work ourselves: nobody can do it for us. It will not be done until we see how important it is to do it. Until we see how our detrimental and negative emotions are destroying our own lives and of those around us. To really understand that and stop blaming our parents, our society, the government, etc. It’s nothing to do with that. It’s to do with ourselves. Until we can transform inside, forget about the outside. Outside is samsara which by its very nature is suffering but Buddha Nature is inside us. Buddha Nature is completely pure. All these habits which seem so intractable, all these attitudes of “mine”, all these physical, mental and verbal habits to which we seem so addicted and in which we seem so deeply entrenched are really just clouds. They are not the sky. They are not what we really are. They are our false identifications and therefore they can be changed, they can be transformed. There are ways.

First, we have to recognize, accept and then let them go. We can do this if we want to do it. If we don’t really want to, then we won’t. Everything is up to each one of us. The examples from the past are there, the examples in the present are here. The teachers are here, the books are here. Actually, there are no excuses but we all make excuses. The spiritual path is a path of freedom. It’s a path which is difficult but at the same time with increasing freedom comes increasing joy.

First, we have to see how our habits arise. We cannot understand how habits arise until we look inside and see how our minds work. Usually we cannot change certain deep-rooted habits simply by an act-of-will. We also need insight into how all this comes about. When we see it very clearly, the habitual tendency might just drop away by itself and we don’t have to do anything. But in the meantime, a little bit of self-control and discipline would help. However, in the end, one really has to see with wisdom the very deep-rooted quality of the mind. Wisdom is depicted as the sword because it cuts away at the roots of ignorance. And this
wisdom is not an intellectual wisdom but a genuine, very profound insight, a genuine seeing.

In the Buddhist tradition, there are two forms of meditation. One is called ‘calm’ or tranquillity meditation. Sometimes, it’s called calm-abiding meditation or Shamata. The other is ‘insight meditation’ or ‘vipashyana’. When the Buddha left home, he went to study with two yogis. They taught him methods for getting into profound levels of what might be called a trance -- levels of very profound mental absorption in which there was no longer any kind of mental conceptualisation; there was neither perception or non-perception but infinite consciousness, infinite space. They were very high levels which, in his days, were regarded as being liberation. He attained those levels quite quickly but still, he thought, “This is not liberation.” And so, he went back down to the first of these levels where there was still very subtle conceptual thinking. Based on that, he then turned that subtle conceptual thinking onto the analysis of the mind itself. In that way, he attained liberation.

The day-dreams and all the mental chatter that continually goes on are like the waves on the ocean of the mind. With the kind of mind which is churning constantly, we distort what we outwardly project. We misrepresent and we only see in accordance with our own impure vision. We don’t perceive things carefully or correctly. We don’t see what’s really there. We see our version of what is there. Supposing that something happened right here, right now. Afterwards somebody comes and asks various people what happened. Depending on the number of people asked, that many different versions of what happened will be received. Everybody will have his own version of what took place depending on his/her mental make-up, opinion, memory, so on and so forth. We all know of times when someone else is describing an event which happened previously and one is thinking, “No, it didn’t happen like that. No, he didn’t say that, he said this. It was like this, it wasn’t like that.” Because, we always have our own version and of course, we always think our version is the right one. This is because the waves of our minds are very disturbed. We do not see things as they really are.

Now, when the waves calm down, the surface of the ocean then becomes very smooth. When the surface becomes smooth, it reflects very accurately its surroundings. This is like a quiet mind. When the mind has really settled down and is one-pointed, it reflects very accurately what is happening on the outside. There is great clarity of awareness without the interpolation of thoughts and opinions, biases and prejudices or distraction. At the same time, if one looks into the mind itself when it is very clear and settled, one can look continually at the subtle levels of the consciousness which we normally cannot access because our mind is too busy. However the weeds and the mud are still there at the bottom. The negative emotions—our underlying ignorance, our ill-will, our greed, our
envy and our pride-- they are still lying there in latent form but they are quiescent and we can imagine that they are gone. So sometimes, when people go into very blissful states, they think they are enlightened, they think that being blissed-out is liberation!

There was a woman in Nepal-- a very nice and intelligent woman who was always full of joy, peace and love. She was rather New Age and into alternative healing and so on. One lama used to call her the Bliss-Cloud. Then she got a terrible disease-- I think she got cancer-- and she came down from the bliss cloud and really began to face things properly. It’s not all joy and love and bliss out there. However she improved a lot once she actually confronted things. She became more grounded and began to acknowledge the things in her mind which she had never looked at before. It’s very easy to think that we are half-way enlightened if we do a little bit of meditation and feel some peace and bliss. That’s a big danger because some people meditate just in order to feel bliss and peace, which is a dead end.

To begin with it’s very helpful to have a mind which is calm, centred and one-pointed. “One-pointed” means that if we want to meditate on this subject, this is all we think about. Normally, if we try to focus on the breath, we think of anything except the breath. But one-pointedness means that when we say “think of the breath”, we only think of the breath and the other thought patterns become slower. They calm down and sometimes they disappear. The mind becomes balanced, strong, calm, peaceful and clear. This kind of mind becomes a perfect instrument for use in order to proceed further. In itself, a calm and clear mind is not the ultimate but it is an extremely useful tool. Some people say that concentration is bad, that it is coercing and being brutal to the mind-- I don’t know what kind of concentration they ever did! Genuine concentration doesn’t make the mind hard and rigid. It makes the mind very soft and pliable. It’s like when we exercise—at first our muscles are stiff and ache a bit, but if we carry on exercising, with the correct kind of regime, gradually our body becomes very pliant. Our body becomes supple and the knocks, bangs and jolts which would normally hurt us may not injure because our body is now more flexible. Likewise, with a mind which is well trained-- that mind is pliant, soft and supple. It’s not rigid and because the mind is flexible, even if terrible things happen, one is able to deal with them without snapping. So this kind of mind-- the mind which comes about through doing calm-abiding meditation-- is very important as an instrument, which we then use in deepening an understanding of the nature of the mind. It’s a prerequisite, because in order to get into deeper levels of calm-absorption the mind actually has to be very balanced.

Insight meditation, is for dismantling the ego, but we cannot dismantle the ego until we have a well-integrated ego to dismantle. If we have a very fragile ego and
try to dismantle it, we can do more harm than good. So we start by becoming more centred, peaceful, lucid and present. A mind which is pliant and supple can be used any way we want. That kind of mind is a perfect instrument to be used for investigation. One high lama remarked that if we accomplish calm-abiding meditation, the whole of the Dharma is in the palms of our hands. But if we do any practice with a mind that is distracted, uncontrolled and untamed, it will bear very little fruit. The texts say that even if we recite mantras for a million years with a distracted mind, we would never get the results. But if we recite even a few mantras with one-pointed concentration, the results will appear very quickly. Why is this so? It’s because when all the power of the mind is focused on one place, the energy isn’t dissipated in a thousand different directions. This is a good thing because instead of being separated from the object, the mind is merged so that whatever we turn our attention to will succeed.

But in the meantime, even if we don’t get that far, to have a mind which is quiet, and centred is beneficial. We are so scattered, we have no centre except the ego centre, which is not a real centre at all. To be really centred means to have inner space. To be quietly aware and not to be tossed here and there on the waves of our emotions, our thoughts, our memories, and our fantasies.

This whole question of learning how to get the mind quietened down, more concentrated and peaceful, is very important. I’m not saying that we have to sit in meditation for three hours at a time. Of course if we can sit for three hours that is very good, but if we can’t do so much, then even a short time—ten minutes a day—would be helpful. Normally, whenever we sit down, we are doing something: we are looking at the television, we are listening to music, we are reading a book, we are staring at the computer: anyway we are doing something. So this is a period of time in which we sit and in a very profound way, we are doing nothing. We just are. Instead of doing, we are just being. Who are we when we are not doing anything, not even thinking? So that’s what it is all about. It’s learning just how to be. How to be in this moment with a mind which is quiet and settled but very clear. It’s not a dreamy state. It’s a very alert and awake state. It’s like we are waking up for the first time, and the mind becomes extremely alert. The awareness becomes radiant. If we are in a state which is ever so peaceful and blissful like lying on a cloud, dreamy and without clear awareness, then that’s wrong. That’s called sinking and if we continually remain like that in our meditation, it becomes a barrier and obstacle.

We all have difficulties when we start. Even the Buddha himself had problems in the beginning. Who does not? Our minds are undisciplined; they are wild. They are compared to a wild rampant elephant—not the nice tamed elephants we see in zoos and circuses but wild elephants who can be out of control and, when on the rampage, destroy so many trees. The Buddha said that our mind was like a wild
elephant. Sometimes, he said, it was like a drunken wild elephant in rut— you get the idea. Sometimes, the Buddha also compared the mind to a restless monkey. A monkey in a tree is always jumping up and down, totally restless and never still for a minute. If you watch monkeys in the wild, they spend most of their time fighting with each other, copulating, trying to steal things, or just jumping around mindlessly. Really, the human condition mirrored!

Everybody has much the same problem; everybody has a difficult mind. If it’s not one thing, it’s another. Nobody ever just sat down and entered a deep meditative state. Those who can meditate now can do so because they persevered and had patience.

Why is it that we are so lazy and make so many excuses for ourselves when it comes to spiritual things? I know many people who have started meditating. They meditated a week or two and they still had thoughts, and so they gave up! How unrealistic! The essence of good practitioners is that they go on. They don’t give up, they just carry on. They have great patience and great perseverance, and that’s what wins in the end—not the spiritually brilliant ones who can do all sorts of wonderful things in the beginning but then get bored and go on to something else after a while. It’s the people who plod along and who keep trying and trying and never give up who win in the end. Believe me.

Nobody can do it for you. Just something very simple like being with the breath—breathing in, breathing out— that’s all. The Buddha got enlightened through breath meditation. We think that it has to be something very difficult, very esoteric and something very special. But it’s so simple. The problem is that we don’t do it. We are always waiting for someone to do it for us. Keep the mind on this one point in a very relaxed way, not in a tightly-controlled way. If we have a wild horse, there are two ways of dealing with it. We can either beat the horse into submission; cause it to cower until in the end we bend it to our will because it is a broken-spirited hack. Or we can start to tame the horse by gently bringing it onto our side so that eventually it cooperates. We feed it with things that it likes. Slowly, we bring out the rope but talk to it nicely and we reassure the horse very gently that we are not going to harm it, that we are going to help it. Then gradually, the horse becomes confident and ceases to fear the trainer. In the end, the horse accepts the discipline, it accepts the training; it begins to enjoy it and work with the trainer.

In the same way with meditation, we can seek to control the mind. We can say to the thoughts, “I am not going to think anymore. I am really going to concentrate.” We can do it: we can suppress the thoughts. It could be that the mind could get quite powerful doing that. But if we are not careful it will be a very hard and rigid mind -- especially if we sit for a very long time in the beginning when we don’t
want to sit-- this can arouse a great aversion to sitting. Some people go through meditation courses where they have to sit for three hours at a time right from the beginning and end up never wanting to go for another meditation session in their life. Other people who have the aptitude for this kind of intense regime can sit through and really get to like it. It depends on the person.

On the whole, what we are trying to do is not coerce or force the mind, but encourage the mind to cooperate. When we are reading a fascinating book or watching an interesting movie, we don’t have to tell the mind, “Now, concentrate.” We are there engrossed in the book or in the movie, and we get very upset if someone disturbs us. The mind is completely focused, merged and concentrated. The mind can do that. The mind has that capacity if it is interested in what it is doing. Scientists, mathematicians or musicians--anyone who is really interested in what s/he is doing--don’t have to be forced to concentrate. So with meditation, we must also use the mind skilfully so that we are not forcing the mind. We are helping the mind to cooperate. This is not so easy because a pebble is not as fascinating as a good book or a good movie, and watching our breath, after a while--same old breath in and out—can get a bit stale and boring, although of course it’s not the same old breath.

We have to be very skilful and one way is initially to keep the period of meditation fairly short. Then when the mind begins to get tired, to stop for a short space and start again while mind is still interested. If we stop while the mind is still enjoying being quiet, then the mind will remember that and be inclined to start again. If we go on for too long to the point where we are really fed-up and tired, the mind remembers that subtle aversion and will not want to sit again. So it is very important to encourage and work with the mind so that the mind enjoys meditation. Our meditation period should be the highlight of the day. It should not be another burden which we have to force ourselves into. This is the one time when we are alone with our own mind; this is the time when we can really go inside instead of always looking outside. This is very precious time, and we must cultivate the attitude of really appreciating this opportunity to go inwards and become more centred. Sometimes, people take on so many commitments and try to meditate for so long that it become an extra stress in their lives instead of being a cure for their stress.

Of course, we need discipline: that we sit every day whether we feel like it or not. If we would only make a little effort this would help to resolve the problems that we all have in our hearts. We have to make some effort, persevere and be patient. We need to have that discipline. We have to overcome the inertia of our minds, the inertia which says “That’s the way I am, I cannot change.” And we have to say, “Yes, I can change. The path is still here, it’s still valid. There are still teachers. I can do it.”
Q. Are there any benefits to mantra meditation?

A. Yes, of course mantras are very important; there are infinite benefits to mantra meditation. The path of tantra is very profound and very deep but it also requires great dedication. It’s not something where we can just say 108 mantras in the morning and think that that’s going to have an effect on our life. Tantra is something that has to be integrated into our life. I also feel that apart from mantra and visualization in meditation, we should also have periods where we are just look at the mind itself. Most Tibetan practitioners certainly combine the two.

In the early sixties, before I went to India, I was in England. There I heard about the mantra “Om mani padme hum” and assumed that one had to say it out loud continuously. At that the time, as I was working in a library and as I couldn’t recite the mantra audibly I imagined it resounding in my heart. At first, it was in my head, “Om mani padme hum, Om mani padme hum”. After a while, it went downwards and my heart was resounding with “Om mani padme hum”. When that happened, it was as if the mind split and there was a peaceful, quiet and aware centre reverberating with the mantra and everything else-- all the thoughts, the feelings, the sounds and the sights—were as though at a little distance. So in this way, mantra recitation, if it resounds from the heart and if carried on continuously, can be very helpful in developing an inner space, a centre of awareness, in the same way as the Jesus prayer in the Russian Orthodox church is used.

Q. Can music be played during meditation?

A. Not while you are meditating. It can be used beforehand to get your mind into a quiet state if it is the right kind of music. But while you are meditating, your mind should be focused inside and not outside. Music is outside unless one watches the mind while it is listening.

Keep the mind in a relaxed but at the same time, alert state. It’s relaxed, but not sleepy. The Buddha compared the meditative mind to a stringed instrument. If we tighten the strings too much they will give a harsh sound and may snap. That’s a rigid type of meditation. If the strings are too slack, they don’t give any sound at all, so that’s like not making any effort or getting into a sleepy kind of meditation. The strings have to be adjusted just right so they make a beautiful sound. Likewise, in our practice we have to settle our minds in a balanced manner. Relaxed but very clear. Bring the attention first to the body and how we’re sitting. Keep the back straight and the chin slightly tilted downwards. Place the hands together in the lap and then breathe in and out softly. Just know that, just be with the breathing in and the breathing out and do not think about it; just know this and
ignore everything else. The only thing which exists at this moment is the breath, going in and going out.