

Eight-Week Shamatha Retreat, Fall 2013

Week 1

Day 1, am

Start the day with your daily practice to set the motivation for the day.

Mindfulness is so important so that in everything we do, it supports our inner stillness. Settling the body, speech and mind can be useful during the day whether it is for 1 minute, 5 minutes or 20 minutes.

During this retreat, we will be learning how to breathe – not so much about learning what to do, but unlearning some of our habitual patterns.

Dharma is the cultivation of genuine happiness, without the need for external stimuli.

We are addicted to stimulation. When there are no external stimuli, we create our own internal stimuli through rumination. We spend very little time just being quiet and still. It's very beneficial to be quiet and still ... but being clear, not dopey and zoning out.

In this first stage of Mindfulness of Breathing, we need ***to learn to relax more and more, without losing the clarity*** we started with. Trying to reach a deep sense of relaxation is not only good for our meditation, it is also beneficial for everything else we do, e.g. conversation, art, education, etc. But it's important not to try too hard. Relaxation is about releasing thoughts, images, memories, etc.

Everything gets more interesting the clearer your mind becomes. The more you relax, the more stable you become. The more stable you become, the clearer you become.

Guided meditation...

So, set up your own daily schedule for the retreat. If you are getting distracted in meditation, cut it short. Ideally, you want to feel that your meditation session has been too short. It's like eating. Stop before you feel full.

Day 1, pm

There are two important tasks to build into every activity you undertake: be clear about your motivation at the start; and dedicate the merits of what you have done at the end.

We're setting out on a journey. You are invited to reflect on your own specific reasons for being here. What brought you here? What was your vision? What good might come from this retreat that would help fulfill your aspiration? And make this conscious.

Guided meditation...

1. What is your own vision of a meaningful life/ for your own flourishing?

There are three areas to consider here:

- (i) hedonic pleasure – pleasure that is in response to some pleasant stimulation. e.g. having a good meal, enjoying a new romance, getting a new job, etc. (it can also incorporate things like taking pleasure in someone else's misfortune, taking alcohol, cocaine, etc). To equate the good life with hedonic pleasure is a gamble. You don't know how it will turn out. However, hedonic pleasure also has an important place e.g. receiving food when you are hungry, medicine when you are sick, etc.
- (ii) eudemonic pleasure – a sense of well-being arising from what we bring to the world rather than what we take from it. e.g. the joy of giving a gift. No one can take this away if the motivation is genuine. What's the benefit of eudemonic pleasure? It's not an end in itself. It's to provide a foundation for the cultivation of genuine happiness or true flourishing.
- (iii) Genuine happiness

2. While holding this in mind, as you recognize your interconnectedness with others, what would you like to receive from the world?

3. How do you want to transform or evolve in order to achieve a meaningful and satisfying life?

4. What would you like to offer to the world around you that would contribute to your true flourishing?

Meditating on the four questions above constitute a loving kindness meditation.

Start with yourself and then extend your sphere of loving kindness outwards to others: to loved ones, friends, acquaintances, people you don't know, people you don't like.

Over time, we become wiser in our aspirations.

Introduction to the theme

The Seven-Point Mind Training goes back to Atisha in the 11th Century. They were later passed onto Dromtönpa and first written down by Chekawa Yeshe Dorje about 900 years ago. It is probably the single most widely taught and practised original Tibetan text in the whole of Tibetan Buddhism.

The seven points cover the following:

- Training in the preliminaries
- Cultivating ultimate and relative bodhicitta
- Learning how to transmute everything that life dishes up, including felicity and adversity
- Synthesizing the essence of the Seven-Point Mind Training into a practice for life
- Looking for signs that your practice is working
- Learning the pledges of mind training - to refrain from certain types of behaviour that harm ourselves and others
- Learning the practices of mind training

1. Train in the preliminaries

This includes the four thoughts that turn the mind so that you see things from a completely different perspective. It is taught in all the four schools of Buddhism. It involves discursive meditation.

The first of these four thoughts that turn the mind is our precious human life of leisure and opportunity. This involves a revolution in the way we view our identity and our life. It changes our perspective on our very existence. We need to examine the compelling evidence that supports this.

It's not a good idea to go directly from your daily activities to sleep. So get into bed, lie in the supine position. Settle your body, speech and mind. Attend to the earth element, let your awareness sink down, then begin breathing, releasing with every out-breath. Sustain your clarity. When you feel you are starting to lose the edge on your clarity, shift your position, then go to sleep. This will help you to have a refreshing night's sleep.

Day 2, pm

It's important to achieve a balance between the three stages of Mindfulness of Breathing. The first one is simple but not easy. You need to learn how to fully relax. Allow yourself this freedom. For the 24 minutes of a meditation session, there are no demands on your time; there are no obligations. This means you are at leisure. When you have leisure you have opportunity. But you need to know how to make the most of this opportunity.

Don't approach it like a hedonic pursuit where you don't know how it will work out. Don't approach Dharma this way. Don't look for instant gratification. Set a positive motivation before you start and it will be time well spent where you have the opportunity to achieve greater wholeness, greater clarity, stillness and sanity. You can't control the outcome of hedonic pursuits. But right in the moment in Shamatha, you can. You can develop greater clarity while you are so soft, so relaxed. It is a skill that you can develop.

Thoughts will arise. Just view them like you would if someone came up to you and asked "Would you like to dance?" and you just acknowledged them and smiled. Nothing more. And they then moved onto ask someone else.

To assist your alertness when meditating:

- Drink a glass of water before you begin, so your eyes can stay open and more light can come in
- Assume a posture of erectness and vigilance
- Turn the lights on in the room
- Turn on the air-conditioning so it isn't muggy.

Remember the key to success is in the out-breath. And the key to the out-breath is in the last part. Don't ruminate through it. Just observe it and let the breath flow in when it is ready, and accept it freely.

Guided meditation...

You will come to appreciate the reciprocal relationship between Shamatha and discursive meditation.

First train in the preliminaries

There are four thoughts for turning the mind, each of which can actually result in a revolution in perspective if they are understood well.

(1) Precious human life of leisure and opportunity

This question of human rebirth is rooted in direct insight or knowledge of the Buddha. He had direct knowledge of his past lives, which he achieved on the first watch of the night when he became enlightened. He not only told of this, but he explained how to achieve it. He made it public, every step in the process. He saw other people achieve it too. He spent 45 years passing on what he had learnt, then others continued with these teachings after his death. He said "Don't just accept this on blind faith. Come and see for yourself. Test. Test."

In the film 'Yogis of Tibet', a yogi looks straight at the camera and says frankly: "I can remember all my past lives".

If you pursue a life of hedonic pursuits, you must know that there is no greater truth than karma, the consequences of wholesome and unwholesome behavior. The key is understanding the principle of dependent origination.

This is important if we look at our present life in the context of many, many of our lives. However, in the field of research it is looked at purely as a religious belief. Despite all those who claim to be liberated/ to have achieved genuine happiness, it hasn't created a tsunami. The discoveries have been replicated over and over, but they are seldom made public. And the criticism is that just because someone says they can recount all their past lives doesn't mean there is "evidence".

Research has been done and it has shown that some people can crack through the psyche/the coarse mind. However, the psyche dies when you die. But when consciousness goes to a deeper level, there is no way to investigate this. It is like stem cell consciousness, and it is something which is configured by karma.

Matthieu Ricard recently told Alan of a place he visited where there are 800 monks, 300 of whom are in retreat for life, and some of these are focusing on Shamatha. But their discoveries are likely to remain private. We need this to be vigorously researched. For example, when they are deep in Samadhi to ask questions about trivial but verifiable events that have occurred in this life, right back to childhood, and to tell this to the researchers who can actually check to see if they are accurate in their recall. There is a need for a controlled experiment. When you are in the substrate consciousness, you go very deep and you can recall specific things from years ago. And this includes past lives! So, once the accuracy of their recall has been established, then ask them about events prior to this life and see if the researchers can confirm that such events actually did take place. If this can be proved, it is enormously significant. You can't turn consciousness into nothing. It's like matter and energy. Knowledge of past lives is the one hypothesis that can be tested. All the others from other religions and philosophies about what happens after death have not been tested. They are based simply on belief.

If we can find a conducive Dharma environment, where the day doesn't have to be spent 'hunting and gathering', that is, we have this leisure and opportunity, we shouldn't waste it, we shouldn't fill it with junk food for the mind.

What is Dharma? It is a way of viewing reality that gives rise to genuine happiness. We are sewing the seeds for meaningful future lifetimes, so that mental afflictions are diminished over time.

What is the rarity of this precious human rebirth? There are 7 billion people on the planet, the majority of whom are scraping an existence. Of those who aren't, what percentage are seeking genuine happiness? Have spiritual companions? Have a good teacher? How many have the opportunity to fill that leisure with seeking genuine happiness? Etc. The answer is tragically very few. If we squander this opportunity, when will we get another one? Reflect on this.

"If you get this concept, there is no return!" Recognise this every time you wake up.

This is an invitation to revolution! There's no time to waste. The time we spend is not a renewable resource. Once it's gone, it's gone in this lifetime. A life that does not appreciate this is not an authentic life. The Buddha said the biggest reality is the reality of impermanence. And the reality of suffering doesn't go away just because we die. If it were that simple, it would make life a lot easier as you could pursue whatever hedonic pleasures you liked then die and it would all be over. It doesn't work that way.

Day 3, am

We now move into the second phase of Mindfulness of Breathing. It involves the cultivation of stability through a sustained or ongoing flow of coherent attention, but without contraction.

Generally when we concentrate, we become more contracted, tense and worn out. Yet yogis can meditate for hours at a time and emerge fresh. This is because they are relaxed. The balance required here is **to increase stability but**

without losing relaxation. We are withdrawing our attention from anything outside ourselves. Our focus is on the inner self, while monitoring the mind with introspection.

Retreat means withdrawal. The purpose of a retreat is to replenish, restore, revision and recuperate, to develop the skills of relaxation, stability and vividness so we can apply them to life in the world outside. We are learning to take a fresh approach to life. A retreat in itself is not a path to liberation. Instead, a retreat is an opportunity to achieve the bare minimum of Samadhi in order to better understand the world, and to set the foundation for achieving the first dyana or Shamatha.

The substrate consciousness is unique to each individual. It illuminates, but does not fuse with, reify, or grasp thoughts. In this retreat, we will be trying to learn how to be aware of the body and the breath, but without identifying with it, just resting in awareness, which is illuminating itself.

To maintain continuity in between sessions, try to maintain mindfulness with everything you do. For example, it can be helpful to get up off the cushion and go for a walk around the premises, but to do so mindfully. When walking, bring your awareness to your body, to the earth element, then let your awareness come out to the clouds, to the sky, to the horizon. And enjoy it. Then return to the cushion with an ongoing flow of mindfulness.

Guided meditation...

Day 3, pm

In this second stage of Mindfulness of Breathing, we are trying to develop stability through a flow of doing. We have a job to do every minute of the 24 minutes and that is to maintain an on-going flow of mindfulness. So that if other thoughts, memories, images come up, you can say to them: 'Sorry, I'm really busy. I don't have time for anything else'. You are filling your awareness with sensations. We are fine-tuning two faculties: mindfulness and introspection (the quality control). And we need to consistently sustain effort for the task.

Guided meditation ...

As we become aware of anything, there are two things going on:

- (i) knowing the object, and
- (ii) knowing you are aware of the object.

We move backwards and forwards between the two.

The three stages of Mindfulness of Breathing are like a Russian doll with its layers:

- (i) awareness of the body, and the breath within the body
- (ii) awareness of the thoughts that are arising while simultaneously being mindful of the breath
- (iii) the withdrawal of awareness away from thoughts, so that you are simply aware (you then can find out what exists beyond "me" in this life that continues onto subsequent lifetimes).

Alan's aspiration from this 8-week retreat is that everyone leaves with the confidence in at least one of the practices of Mindfulness of Breathing and that he/she is inspired to continue with the practice.

With Mindfulness of Breathing:

- Firstly, you hear the instructions on how to do it. This is conceptual.
- Secondly, you get a sense of what the words mean: mindfulness, introspection, clarity, etc because you have experience of them. This involves reflection.
- Thirdly, you get into a flow. You don't need concepts, you don't need internal commentary, you are just doing it.

(2) Impermanence

The second thought that turns the mind is impermanence. We constantly have desires coming up in the mind, helped along by the bombardment of advertising. It's like being invited to dance over and over again. We need to sort out our priorities for life. What is important? When you talk about impermanence, people will say you're not telling them anything they don't know. They may know, but they haven't actually incorporated it.

All composite phenomena are impermanent – human relationships, our health, our appearance, our job, our status, where we live, etc. They are all in a flow of flux. Everything that arises as a consequence of causes and conditions will decay. We accept this intellectually, but nothing more. We believe things are more enduring than they really are. We latch onto things as they are in the present and assume they will stay that way. This is delusional.

Anything that is born will die.

Anything that is created will be destroyed

Anyone with whom we meet we will eventually part from
Whatever is acquired will be lost
These four truths are awful, but behind them is compelling logic.

So what should we aspire to?

If we return to the context of this precious human life of leisure and opportunity, what is of value?
Matthieu Ricard refers to people who “live a colourful life” – they eat at the best restaurants, they go on fabulous vacations, they have marvelous sound systems, lots of romances, etc and they are so pleased that they have done so many things.

However, when facing death, what is of value? If you are fortunate enough to be able to remember (that is, you don't have dementia or other brain damage) whether you actually did all these things or you dreamed them, it doesn't matter. They are no longer. Are they all equally nothing? Materialism when facing death doesn't have much value. With the continuum of consciousness, you can ask what good have I done with my life? What seeds have I sewn? What still is of value?

One answer sums it up: Dharma. It is the cultivation of virtue, wisdom, compassion, clarity, etc. what we have offered to the world. Because these are the things that we take on our mind-stream to future lives. That is of value!

If you have had experience resting in the substrate consciousness during life where you have released all your personal history, you can do the same at death, where you do not identify with the body and mind - the body dies, the mind fades out – then there will be a smooth transition. A sense of dying won't come up. You will know what continues from lifetime to lifetime.

“The virtue of knowing reality as it is, is the greatest virtue of all”.

If we understand the significance of this, it leads to an enormous shift.

Day 4, am

Guided meditation ...

A question from the group came up: “An abbot once told me that you can't hope to achieve liberation without going through pain. Is that correct?”

Alan's response was clearly 'No!'

There is nothing in any Buddhist text that would support such a comment. The Buddha devoted six years of his life to living like an ascetic, living a life of austerity. It proved damaging to his health, he became emaciated and weak. He realised then that going through pain was not the way to achieve liberation. Instead samadhi arises from bliss.

Nevertheless, when you start out on this path, adversities or difficulties will arise. There is no easy path to enlightenment.

It is important that you are not in avoidable pain when you are meditating because it will be a distraction.
For those who have a tendency to pursue desire, walking or sitting is the best posture
For those who have a tendency to hostility, sitting and lying is the best posture.
In the end, adopt the one that is the most comfortable for you.

Day 4, pm

This afternoon we'll move to the classic Theravada technique of Mindfulness of Breathing.

When you engage in strong physical activity, you need to breathe deeply as you need lots of oxygen.
When you first sit down to meditate, your breaths are likely to be longer. Simply note that.
As your body and mind settle down, you need less oxygen and so your breaths become shorter. Note that.
Then attend to the whole body breathing, and note that.
Finally, calm the composites of the body and mind as you breathe, and note that.

The synergy between relaxation, stability and vividness becomes evident. There are people who do this 6,12,14 hours a day, who only feel pleasantly tired at the end.

So now we are moving to focus on the apertures of the nostrils. When the breath becomes more and more subtle, attend more closely. The volume of air decreases and your breathing can become more subtle than your awareness.

If you attend closely, you can become aware of a background flow of subtle sensation at the nostrils or upper lip. This becomes your baseline and from that baseline, you can detect the in- and out-breaths.

This technique of focusing on the apertures of the nostrils is unique. The object becomes subtler and subtler as long as the acuity of your attention continues. When you start to ruminate, you will notice that your breathing becomes coarse again. The Buddha recommended this technique of Mindfulness of Breathing for people who ruminate a lot. It also gives you greater balance and can therefore aid in helping to heal the physical body.

Guided meditation ...

A discursive meditation on impermanence can be very helpful.

Firstly by drenching your mind in the inevitability of death. It's a good exercise to imagine your last hours with all your loved ones around you. When it does happen, it won't come as a surprise because you will have already rehearsed it. This is not being morbid. It's an opportunity to transmute it so it is not experienced as adversity. Factor this discursive meditation into the activities of your daily life.

Secondly, the time of your death is uncertain. It could happen any day, even after the next breath. Sustaining a recognition of this gives the juice to life. It is truly precious.

Thirdly, facing death, what is of real value? Not making money for your heirs. They rarely thank you for it. Rather, Dharma is the only thing of value.

At the very least, dying without regret is the outcome of a consistent daily practice. The Buddha said: If your life is interwoven with The Four Immeasurables, you can die with confidence. If there is a future life, you have nothing to worry about. If there isn't a future life, you know you will have lived a virtuous life. But if one has focused on the cultivation of Samadhi, one can gain insight into the nature of reality, and then die fearlessly.

If you immerse yourself fully in The Four Immeasurables so your mind actually becomes bodhicitta, then the dying experience can be joyful, a celebration. You die happy. If you have achieved irreversible bodhicitta, every lifetime thereafter you will be born as a bodhisattva, and every life will have greater and greater meaning. So you don't need to become disheartened. It's all good. This is definitely another revolution in perspective.

(3) The unsatisfactory nature of Samsara

The third thought that turns the mind is the unsatisfactory nature of worldly existence. The Buddha introduced the first noble truth with "This is the reality of suffering. Recognise this." Many people think that this applies to others, not to them. This is delusional. Where is the guarantee that the next life will be a repeat performance? We are not immune to falling into another realm of existence. A yogi who could remember all his past lives said that most of them were lived in the lower realms. The reality of suffering doesn't end just because you die. This is daunting.

It's easy to think : "I'm OK, but you're not OK. My life is quite good at the moment". It's delusional to think this will continue. Dharma brings this point home. Helping others less fortunate is virtuous. But it is important to ask yourself: What is the most I can offer? The Buddha said: It's Dharma. All the other gifts come and go. How can we best be of service? There are many ways. For example, helping people to find hedonic well-being by giving them food when they're hungry, shelter when they're homeless, etc. This is all good but transient.

But to help people achieve genuine happiness where their root afflictions are healed irreversibly, Dharma is the best thing you can offer. To lead them to the path, and along the path, you need to have reached it yourself. That's bodhicitta and it gives rise to a noble aspiration. This is yet another revolution!

Day 5, am

What makes a practice Dharma?

An activity may or may not be Dharma. Mindfulness of Breathing is a good example. You may use it as an exercise to increase attention, as a relaxation technique, as a focusing exercise in order to perform a physical activity better. So the thing that makes it Dharma or not is the motivation behind it. For example, establishing the motivation to achieve the greatest possible spiritual awakening in order to give the greatest possible service to the world makes it Dharma.

It is never too early to start this practice of setting one's motivation prior to engaging in an activity. It can be done before any activity in order to make it more meaningful. So when positive/virtuous motivation to help others is involved, then it's Dharma. Then everything is leading you on the path towards bodhicitta. At the end of the activity, dedicate the merit to the same aspiration, that all beings achieve spiritual awakening. Even if you are old, it's never too late to start. It establishes a current for the future, through the bardo and into the next lifetime. You are establishing "a string of bodhicitta".

The experiences you have just before you die are said to be very influential for the next lifetime. As they say in real estate – location, location and location – in Dharma they say – motivation, motivation and motivation. Keep in mind the saying: “ Be careful what you wish for, because you might get it”. If it is bodhicitta, it’s a good aspiration. And this is a sign of wisdom.

Day 5, pm

If you find when focusing on the sensations of the breath at the nostrils that you are getting tension across the forehead and headaches, then it is important to change your technique before it becomes a habit. Wherever you direct your attention, pressure or prana will emerge. These are things that you can do about this:

- (i) Instead of focusing on the nostrils, resume the Mindfulness of Breathing technique where you focus on the abdomen
- (ii) Try the Mindfulness of Breathing method presented by Buddhagosa using the sign and counter-sign (which is described in detail in Alan’s book “The Attention Revolution”)
- (iii) Try the Mindfulness of Breathing technique describe by Asunga, one of the greatest adepts of Indian Buddhism. Attend to the sensations of the breath throughout the whole body, not just at the nostrils. These sensations will become increasingly subtle as you move through the nine stages, until they become just a murmur, then you just release them, and you achieve Shamatha.

(4) Karma

Karma is the fourth point that turns the mind.

Geshes study karma for four years as part of their training. The Buddha said it is the most complex phenomenon in the universe. Karma involves acts of volition. It makes sense only in terms of the continuity of consciousness that precedes and follows this lifetime. Sometimes it will come to fruition in the same lifetime. Sometimes it has repercussions over multiple lifetimes. You need to be a Buddha to fathom it and know it directly. In the second watch of the night of his enlightenment, the Buddha gained direct knowledge of myriad sentient beings and their lifetimes and all their inter-relationships in multiple modalities, human and non-human.

There is individual karma and there is collective karma, that is, karma through shared activity.

Where is the evidence that consciousness stops at death? There isn’t any. Whether we believe this or not, we are betting our lives on it. The repercussions are vast. To investigate this with empirical evidence is critical. The best evidence is coming out of the University of Virginia. Over 40 years, Ian Stevenson, head of Psychiatry, studied children who told of their past lives. His colleague, Jim Tucker, has carried on the work and has written a book called “Life before Life”. They are rigorous and meticulous in their research and they approach it with an open mind. Many say that such a thing cannot be studied scientifically, which is not true. The evidence is there, but because it is contrary to their beliefs, most scientists won’t accept it.

The discovery of the nature of the continuity of consciousness has been replicated many, many times. The evidence is there rather than being taken on authority. Meditating on actions and their consequences radically shifts one’s perspective. At some point, you either trust the Buddhist theory of karma or you don’t; you either have confidence in it or you don’t. It’s like a long close friendship where experience after experience shines through with integrity. So when your friend says: “Believe me”, you’re prepared to accept it or at least find out more about it.

The four ‘laws’ of karma

(i) The invariability of positive/negative karma

What makes an action wholesome or unwholesome? Positive or negative? Virtuous or non-virtuous? The seeds of an action are accumulated in the continuity of consciousness and it eventually comes to a point in time when they manifest. If the full maturation or effect of an action is one of well-being, happiness, joy, felicity, you can go back to the action that caused that effect and say it was a virtuous action. If the full maturation or effect is one of misery and unhappiness, then the seeds that gave rise to that effect were from a non-virtuous action.

To understand the depth and complexity of karma, we need to achieve a high level of Samadhi. It’s beyond the scope of rational investigation. However, in its absence, we can rely on the authority of the Buddha.

Can we understand in the context of this lifetime how to determine if an action is wholesome or unwholesome? If we get a sense of well-being arising from within, not just from some external stimuli, given a certain activity or deliberate action of body, speech and mind, we can ask: Is this activity conducive to nurturing my own and others’ happiness or is it detrimental or corrosive to my own and others’ happiness? If we look at a wide array of activities of our own and others’ conduct in context and look at their consequences, if they enhance genuine happiness, we can safely say they are virtuous... if they lead to negative outcomes, we can say they are non-virtuous.

This simple working definition of 'virtuous' and what we call 'non-virtuous' actions, map very well onto the Buddha's more complex and subtle teachings about positive and negative karmic actions.

Let's take an environmental example. Take DDT. In a vial, it's just a chemical and in isolation in the tube it is not poisonous. It's not a problem. But if you take it and spray it over fields to kill the insects, which eat the crops and with the intention of improving the farmer's profits, it enters into the complex array of inter-relationships of the natural environment and leads to illnesses like cancers. It becomes poisonous and does enormous damage to sentient beings. The early maturation was good (more profit). But the longer-term maturation is far from good and has karmic consequences. We therefore need to look at the consequences before undertaking any action.

(ii) The natural increase of karma

When we sow a seed through action, what holds true for a virtuous deed, also holds true for a non-virtuous one. By engaging in an action, it slips into the complex causal nexus of inter-relationships. A seed is sown in the mind-stream, but once sown, it increases in magnitude exponentially, that is, little actions, big consequences.

(iii) If a deed is not committed, its effects will not be experienced

If a calamity strikes a group of people and causes them to suffer but one person is not affected, then it simply means that that one person did not engage in the original action that led to the calamity.

(iv) Karmic seeds never lose their potency

The seeds of karma do not self-annihilate, they don't disappear, they don't lose their potency. They continue until such time as they manifest.

In contrast to the belief that everything is the result of fate, St Augustine in the 4th or 5th Century promoted the notion of free will, that 'we are responsible for our actions'. Similarly, the Buddha refuted that karma is fate. He refuted the notion that actions are just random. He also refuted that our actions are pre-determined. He said that we can make choices about how we act.

Refer to Alan's book "Meditation on a Buddhist Skeptic" to understand this more fully.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama says "The more sane we are, the more understanding we have, the more responsible we are for our conduct".

Our presence on this earth is as an observer-participant. We are agents, we are involved. We are not simply victims of others' actions. We need to look carefully at how we react to what life dishes up, what karma dishes up. We need to learn how to transmute our experiences, which in turn helps to shift the world we are living in. This goes right to the heart of ultimate bodhicitta.

Even if we are a little unsure, we can take this concept of karma as a working hypothesis. If there is continuity of consciousness beyond death, does my behavior now have serious consequences for what comes after? Yes or No? If we think it is unrelated, that it's just a result of the random, chaotic world we live in, then we're out of luck. If we think the answer is yes, then we are creating our future.

The Buddha said that all evil stems from delusion. If you know reality as it really is, then the result will be genuine happiness. And ethics is embedded in the fabric of reality.