

FOREWORD FOR *THE ESSENCE OF BUDDHISM*

by Sogyal Rinpoche

Over the past fifty years, the study and practice of the Buddha's teachings has begun to flourish in many parts of the world. More and more people, particularly in the West, have developed a deep interest in following the Buddhist path, and are embracing the teachings in a wholehearted and genuine way.

Whether we choose to see Buddhism as one of the world's great religions, as a 'science of mind', or simply as a way of life, it is clear that what it has to offer is urgently and vitally needed in today's world—perhaps as never before. For all of our advances in science and technology and the benefits they have brought, material progress on its own cannot guarantee lasting or ultimate happiness. On the contrary, the more progress we make, the more frustrated, restless, aggressive and speedy we seem to become. From my own experience of living and teaching in the West, I have seen how practical and powerful the teachings of Buddha are, and the way in which they can address so many of our most deeply-engrained problems. There is today a real and growing hunger everywhere for such tools to negotiate the challenges of life, find happiness, and understand and transform the mind.

The Buddhist wisdom of Tibet is a living experience that has been passed down in an unbroken lineage to the present day. In Tibet, one thousand two hundred years of history were devoted almost exclusively to one pursuit: the training of the heart and mind through spiritual practice. While the West gradually mastered the outer world through science and technology, in the laboratories that were the monasteries and hermitages of the Himalayas, Tibet perfected the 'inner sciences' of the mind, every bit as precise and rigorous as the methodology of science. Today, these ancient teachings are bringing benefit to countless people, and are held in the highest esteem by scientists, philosophers, and spiritual leaders alike.

There has been no greater ambassador for the Buddhist tradition of Tibet than His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who has tirelessly explored how the teachings can contribute to the welfare of society. Time and again, His Holiness has emphasized the importance of relating the wisdom and compassion contained in the teachings to modern life. Now, if the words spoken

by the Buddha more than 2,500 years ago are to be of real and lasting benefit today, it is vital that they are communicated in a way that is relevant to people's lives, without losing any of their power and authenticity. The teachings are extraordinarily vast, and it is hardly surprising that questions can arise when we first encounter the Buddhadharma, and as we begin to follow the path. Without explanation and clarification, the deeper meaning of the teachings can often remain hidden behind the words and the form, which is why books such as the one that you are holding in your hands are of such enormous value and importance.

Few people are better placed to communicate the essence of Tibet's rich Buddhist culture than Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche. Having received his spiritual education under the guidance of the sixteenth Gyalwang Karmapa, Rinpoche has spent many years observing the reality of life in the West, and sharing his deep understanding of the Dharma with others. In this book, he delivers a profound and engaging overview of the path, from the perspective of the Kagyü order—one of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The Kagyü tradition is famed as the practice lineage that has given birth to countless great saints and sages throughout the centuries, down to the present day. This is the lineage of Milarepa, Tibet's great yogi and saint, who attained enlightenment in one lifetime, and whose life story and songs of spiritual mastery made him an inspiration to millions of practitioners for nearly a thousand years.

Beginning with the Four Noble Truths, which provide the framework for all that the Buddha taught, Traleg Rinpoche explains the three yanas or 'vehicles' of teaching and practice, as they are presented in the Tibetan tradition. At the same time, he gives skilful guidance and clarification on some of the most fundamental aspects of the teachings, anticipating questions from his readers so as to leave no room for misunderstanding. He encourages us to examine some of the deep-seated beliefs and cultural assumptions that we can unwittingly bring to the Buddhist path, and to reflect upon what it really means to be a spiritual practitioner.

Although this book is immense in its scope, Rinpoche never allows us to lose sight of the key point and ultimate meaning of all the Buddha's teachings: that it is possible to get to the root of suffering, and to bring about lasting happiness for ourselves and others; and that the only way to do this is to work with, understand, tame and transform our mind. Central to this process of transformation is the practice of meditation, from the fundamental methods of shamatha and vipashyana through to the highest teachings of Mahamudra, which lead directly to the recognition of the mind's true nature, the fundamental pure awareness that is present in every one of us.

In presenting the essence of the Buddha's teachings in such a complete and accessible way, Traleg Rinpoche is offering a great service to all who wish to learn more about Tibetan Buddhism, or to deepen their study and practice. I feel very moved and grateful. And I pray that whoever reads this book is infused with new understanding and inspiration, and is able to progress along the path to enlightenment, swiftly and without any obstacle.

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