



The Devil Debates an Angel

Homework Master, Course Four:
Getting Your Life to Work
In a World that Isn't What it Seems

Name _____

Date _____

City _____

Class One: Clouds & Getting Old (verses 70-77)

1) In verse 70 of *The Devil Debates an Angel*, His Holiness the First Panchen Lama mentions the “aftermath.” What is he referring to?

[The “aftermath” is a technical term in Buddhism. It refers to the few hours immediately following a person’s direct perception of emptiness, which takes place inside of a very deep state of meditation.

During this time—as we come out of this meditation—we have special powers, such as the ability to read other people’s minds; to see our own death; and to perceive the faces of infinite numbers of living beings, to love them and to see how we will come to care for them all once we become a Buddha. We even see ahead to the day when we will become that enlightened being.]

2) How does this “aftermath” relate to the idea of an illusion, and how might this apply to a tense situation at work, when our boss is yelling at us?

[During the direct perception of emptiness—which is also referred to as the “path of seeing”—we have the first correct perception that we have ever had in our life! Every other time that we saw or thought anything at all, we were subtly mistaken the whole time.

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Before this time, we're constantly making this mistake but we don't know it. Just after this experience, we still can't stop ourselves from making the same mistake, but at least we know we're making it.

So what is this mistake like? We can understand it in terms of the "yelling boss."

Now when our boss at work is in our face yelling at us, we see a big yelling boss in front of us. That's no mistake. He's there, he's the boss, and he's yelling at us.

But deep in our heart there's a feeling connected to this yelling boss. That feeling tells us that—if the boss only understood us a bit more, or if he took the time to look into whatever problem he's yelling at us about—then he could stop yelling if he wanted to.

That is, we feel that the boss yelling is a decision that the boss has made: that whether the yelling goes on all depends on him.

This perception of the situation is a mistake. The yelling boss is actually just a tiny image which is coming from our mind. That image pops out of a karmic seed in the mind, and that seed was planted at some point in the past, when we yelled at somebody else.

When you think about it then, the yelling boss that we think we see—the one who decided to yell at us and who could decide not to yell at us— is just an illusion. In fact, no such boss ever existed. He is like a mirage in the desert—nothing we could actually ever drink from—and it's impossible to relate to him in the way we imagine we can (reason with him, yell back at him).

That means though that *we* have control over the situation, not him. If we don't like what we're seeing, then all we need to remember is that we have the power to stop it—just by planting different seeds.]

3) His Holiness repeats the idea that all the things around us are only "a reflection appearing in the mirror of emptiness." How does this apply to our old friend, the pen?

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[We all know the story of the pen. I see it as a pen, but a puppy dog sees it as something to chew on. We're both right.

But when we both step out of the room, the cylinder on the table is no longer a pen or a chew toy. At that point, it's just empty—in the sense of a blank white movie screen.

Then I walk back into the room and look at the cylinder. If I have shared pens with people in the past, then I have seeds in my mind for a pen. These seeds open and produce a tiny image, which my mind sends out between me and the cylinder—and so I see the cylinder as a pen. And *that* makes me a human.

If I walk back in the room and seeds open in my mind to see the cylinder as a chew toy, and I have this uncontrollable desire to chew it up, then—those make me a dog!

His Holiness at this juncture is making the same point. When we hold an apple up in front of a mirror, the mirror has the power to produce an image of the apple in the mirror. The mirror is like the blank white screen of emptiness, all around us all the time, that gives our seeds a *place* to put their images out there.

The apple in the mirror is not a real apple, but sometimes if the mirror is really clean we might for a moment mistake the apple-image for a real apple. This is what we're doing all the time, with everything, and this is the meaning of "illusion."]

4) In verse 73, His Holiness says that "we come up with nothing" when we try to find "how one thing can cause another." Discuss this in terms of how an aspirin works to stop a headache.

[When we get a headache, we walk over to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom and take an aspirin. We are hoping that the aspirin will work—that it will be a cause which makes the headache to away. We feel that somehow the ingredients in the aspirin touch the place in our brain where the headache is coming from, and the headache goes away.

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His Holiness though is saying that—if we really look into it—the aspirin is not the cause that makes the headache go away. If we think about it for a moment, we can see how this is true. If something in the aspirin really works to stop headaches, then it should *always* work. But we all know that it doesn't.

What's really happening is something else. In the past, we have made some effort to pay attention to the needs of others. Someone had a headache or some similar problem, and we did something to try to help them get rid of that headache. Seeing and hearing ourselves make this effort—witnessing ourselves make this effort—has planted a seed in our mind, to have our own headache go away.

And so we take an aspirin, and at the same time a seed opens up in our mind to see our own headache go away. If we haven't planted a seed like this by helping someone else, then we won't see our headache go away.

If we really look carefully for something *in* the aspirin which *causes* the headache to go away, then we *come up with nothing*. But if we look for a seed from our own past kindness which opens and makes the headache go away at the same time as we take the aspirin, then we certainly *do* come up with something.

And that's not a small something! It's aspirin that works *every time we need it to.*]

5) His Holiness compares our bodies to clouds that form in the empty sky. What does the sky represent here, and how does the metaphor give us a clue for winning our battle against the process of our body starting to get old?

[The sky here represents, of course, emptiness: the big blank white screen where the seeds in our mind project the images of the events and people of our life.

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When we look down at our own body, an image forms on this white screen. It's like a cloud that comes together out of nothing in a blue sky, forming a white puffy piece of cotton.

Now His Holiness in this section of the text (around verse 75) wants us to be mindful of the process of getting old. Our body may have formed like a puffy white cloud, but those clouds unfortunately always break up and drift back into empty sky, sooner or later. Our body may be an image produced from a seed in our mind, but like everything which pops up out of a seed it will inevitably age and die, as the energy of the seed is used up.

And so it seems that our body must get older.

Remember though that if the body is coming from a seed in our mind, then we can do something about this aging process. We just need to plant new seeds to kick in as the older ones wear out! And that we do by respecting life, by caring for the health and happiness of others. If you don't like getting old, then start paying more attention to other people's ailments, and help them get over these illnesses.]

Coffee shop assignment: Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn't know well before this teaching; do your homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, think about someone who often upsets you, and try to see why they might be an illusion.

Please write here the two times that you started these meditations (homeworks without these times will not be accepted):