

Ideas to Make Life Better

By Alison Murdoch

“These are ideas to make life better ... the minute that you follow the Guidelines, your life changes.” – LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE



Drawing of King Songtsen Gampo by Solu Khumbu thangka painter Oleshe, from the private collection of Richard Tendzin.

A set of “human Dharmas” was introduced into seventh-century Tibet by King Songtsen Gampo.

In May 2004 I had the good fortune to spend an evening with Lama Zopa Rinpoche at his home in Aptos, California. The atmosphere was extraordinary: Every wall and tabletop was covered with gorgeous thangkas, sparkling water bowl offerings, and row upon row of golden statues. Yet the subject of our conversation was very different. I was there to discuss how to share the wisdom and insights of the Dharma with a wider group of people “for whom the traditional presentation doesn’t fit.”

The late Lama Thubten Yeshe had given this vision the label “Universal Education.” Lama wanted to “go beyond Buddhism,” and create publications, training programs, and projects that were “not a religious trip,” but “wisdom and method scientifically and logically expressed as the universal reality of universal human beings.” At Lama Zopa’s request, I had just accepted the job of taking this great vision forward.

During the evening, Lama Zopa kept coming back to the importance of what he subsequently labeled “The 16 Guidelines for a Happy Life” – a set of precepts or “human Dharmas” that had been introduced into seventh-century Tibet by King Songtsen Gampo. “Wherever you start, this should be the practice,” Rinpoche said. This came as something of a surprise.

The previous year, Lama Zopa had given an inspiring teaching on the subject at Land of Medicine Buddha in Soquel, California. King Songtsen Gampo certainly seemed to share the aims of our new organization, Universal Compassion and Wisdom for Peace (UCWP): namely to help people develop their capacity to be kind and wise and to create a more peaceful society. However, I couldn’t work out how the Guidelines were going to fire people up in the twenty-

first century. They belonged to a different era, more than a thousand years ago. How on earth were we going to bring them up to date?

Three years later, we are on the way to understanding the enormous potential that Lama Zopa identified within the Guidelines. It has been a complex and challenging journey that has now involved hundreds of people all over the globe who have attended conferences, participated in focus groups, contributed illustrative material, and given advice by email and telephone. Nor is the journey complete: In this article I will be talking about version two of the Guidelines, with version three already underway. This project has given me a fascinating insight into the collaborative intercultural process by which the Dharma has evolved and spread over the past 2500 years.

ANCIENT WISDOM, MODERN WORLD

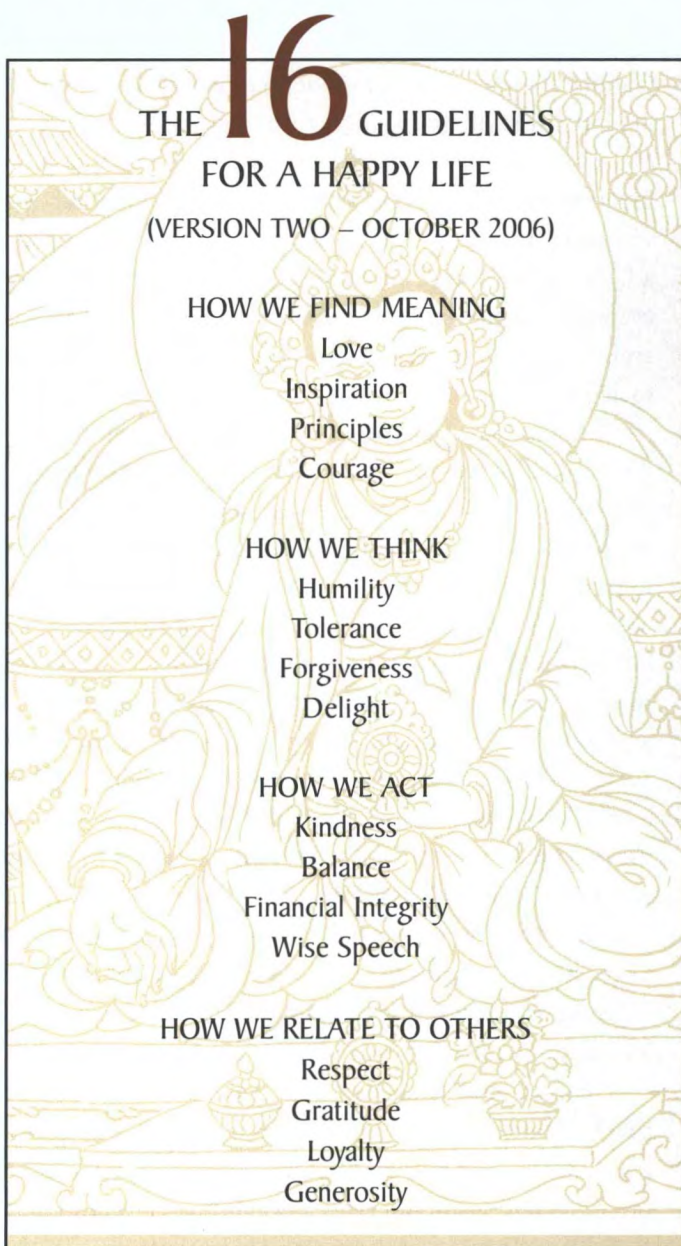
The original Guidelines consisted of such statements as, “to appreciate those possessing knowledge or qualities,” “to take the correct measure of food and drink,” and “to take great responsibility, being broad-minded and brave.” The meaning is as inspiring and relevant as ever, but the phrasing and presentation needed a radical update. Not only were the Guidelines too long for most of us to memorize, but they also sounded a bit like the Ten Commandments, which would surely be a turn-off for many of the people whom we wanted to reach.

In November 2005 we came up with the idea of summarizing the Guidelines in just sixteen pithy words, which could then be divided into four categories: How we find meaning, How we think, How we act, and How we relate to others. Our aim was to connect with key areas of concern for human beings the world over.

Once the core Guidelines team had identified a set of “key words,” we started to put together a commentary on each one. This initially consisted of three elements: a narrative that would inspire the reader to reflect on each Guideline, a set of practical examples from everyday life, and a range of quotes or excerpts taken from complementary spiritual and wisdom traditions. We knew Lama Yeshe’s reputation for insisting that his students check up everything for themselves. He was interested in the authority of experience rather than the experience of authority. We began to realize that in developing the Guidelines, we were beginning to explore the style and culture that Lama Yeshe wanted for universal education.

GOING PUBLIC

During 2006, two pilot versions of the 16 Guidelines were presented to select audiences in Sydney, Australia (at the ‘Happiness and its Causes’ conference in April 2006) and California (at the UCWP Americas launch conference in October 2006). In Sydney, I was the last speaker of the afternoon to address an audience of over 600 people. The preceding talks had been given by a glittering line-up of high-profile authors and public sector leaders, and as I stepped onto the stage, I was unnerved. What on earth would this well-



Excerpt from the 16 Guidelines for a Happy Life, version two

WHY IS FORGIVENESS IMPORTANT?

No one is an island, and no one is perfect, so as we go through life it is inevitable that some of our interactions with others are going to be painful. There will be times when, both as individuals and as communities, we are going to hurt one another. In fact, as our world becomes ever more complex and interconnected, the opportunities for conflict are likely to increase.

When we experience difficulties with others, one option is that we can simply react with anger. Mahatma Gandhi is someone who experienced many hardships in his life but felt strongly that anger was not the way to go. "An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind" was his comment on the idea of retaliation and revenge. Gandhi's logic was that any of us who fails to forgive is actually trapped in a cycle of inner and sometimes outer violence, which will eventually come back to hurt us. We only have to look around us to see tragic cases where whole nations and societies are suffering in this way.

Laurens van der Post arrives at the same conclusion in his book, *The Night of the New Moon*. "Forgiveness, my prison experience had taught me, was not mere religious sentimentality; it was as fundamental a law of the human spirit as the law of gravity. If one broke the law of gravity one broke one's neck; if one broke this law of forgiveness, one inflicted a mortal wound on one's spirit and became once again a member of the chain gang of cause and effect from which life has laboured so long and so painfully to escape."

If we look closely, we can see that while holding a grudge is emotionally painful to the so-called "wronged party," it has the potential to be physically harmful as well. Bitterness can eat into us, like cancer, making us sick in body and mind. At a family level, not forgiving a perceived "perpetrator" can lead to generations of unhappy relations, as resentment and ill will linger on. At a national level, not-forgiving can be catastrophic, leading to a prolonged cycle of wars, death, and misery.

"Forgiveness" is the tool that can enable us to stop hitting back at the people and situations that cause us pain. It is also the healing that enables us to move on from a painful situation and regain our happiness and peace of mind.

educated and sophisticated audience make of the Guidelines, with their straight-talking down-to-earth approach? The answer was – they loved them! The booklet sold out, with people asking where they could get a hold of more copies for friends and family.

More than 250 people chose to attend my workshop the following day, where in the intervals I needed a minder to stave off the many questions! The Australian Broadcasting Corporation requested an interview. It was an encouraging glimpse of the power that the Guidelines still hold, all these centuries later.

NEXT STEPS

At the beginning of 2007, a team of writers and designers met together to begin work on version three of the Guidelines, which will be launched at the first European conference on 'Happiness and Its Causes' in London this October. Following consultation with Lama Zopa, some of the key words are being revised. Each Guideline will be linked with a role model such as Desmond Tutu (Forgiveness), Mahatma Gandhi (Principles), Nelson Mandela (Courage), and Mohammad Yunus (Financial Integrity). The new Patron of UCWP, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, will represent Kindness. There will be beautiful photographic illustrations, a meditation to deepen our understanding of each Guideline, and illustrative material such as poetry, films and documentaries, music, and cartoons. Our aim is to create something practical, profound, and eye-catching that can be translated and adapted for use throughout the world.

After the public launch of the Guidelines in October 2007, the focus will be on training and dissemination. UCWP is seeking funding to create a 'train the trainers' course that will give Dharma students and others the confidence and skills to run 16 Guidelines courses and retreats at their local FPMT center, community center, or workplace. We also want to create a 16 Guidelines study guide for use by reading circles and house groups. Lama Zopa is keen for the 16 Guidelines to be accessible to children, so Tara Redwood School in Soquel, California, has started work on a curriculum guide for teachers, a set of story books created by children, and a collection of folk tales that illustrate their meaning.

"Basically, the Guidelines make everyone respect other people and stop harming them. They bring the human life into good shape. They take care of everybody and bring peace to the whole country, even the whole world."

— LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

The 16 Guidelines are a challenge to our collective imagination. Can we use them to set in motion a social epidemic, in which people all over the world [who haven't already connected with the traditional Dharma] begin to create the causes for happiness rather than for suffering? As a first step, they are being piloted in Buddhist centers: Land of Medicine Buddha in California is using them in their staff meetings, and Ven. Karin Valham is drawing on them for meditation courses at Kopan Monastery in Nepal. The second step is to take them out into the wider world. Rasmus Hougaard in Copenhagen is piloting workshops on how to bring the 16 Guidelines into the workplace. Ven. Aileen of Liberation Prison Project is distributing 16 Guidelines booklets to prisoners in Sydney. Ven. Tenzin Chonyi in Australia is incorporating them into a book about addiction. Vens. Davina Delors and Pascale Barithel in Paris are developing a set of yoga asanas based on the Guidelines, in which body and mind are brought together in the pursuit of compassion and wisdom.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

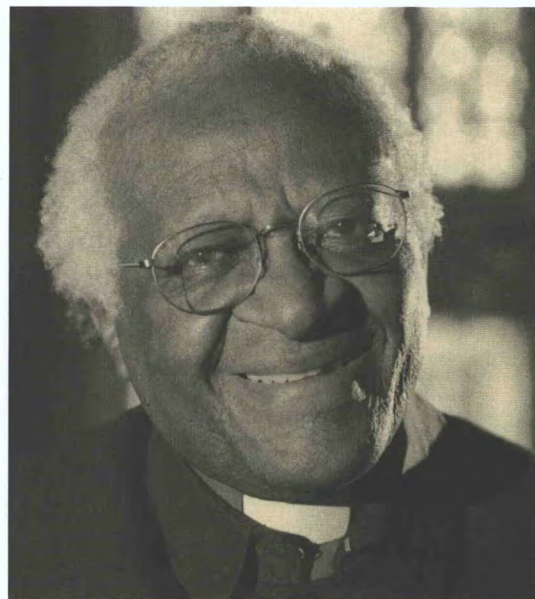
If this project interests you, we encourage you to download a copy of version two from www.essential-education.org. The website will also keep you up to date with 16 Guidelines developments. These will include the latest version and translations, a wiki for collecting supplementary material, and a forum for people who want to incorporate them into their lives and work. If we can leverage the skills and knowledge of both the UCWP and FPMT networks, there is the potential to create something truly international and universal.

UCWP is particularly keen to hear from anyone who would like to develop their own 16 Guidelines initiative. We are also looking for financial support so that we can develop, publish, and disseminate more 16 Guidelines programs. Please contact me directly at alison@essential-education.org if you would like to help in this way.

To keep in touch with the work of Universal Compassion and Wisdom for Peace, please sign up for our regular e-newsletters on www.essential-education.org.

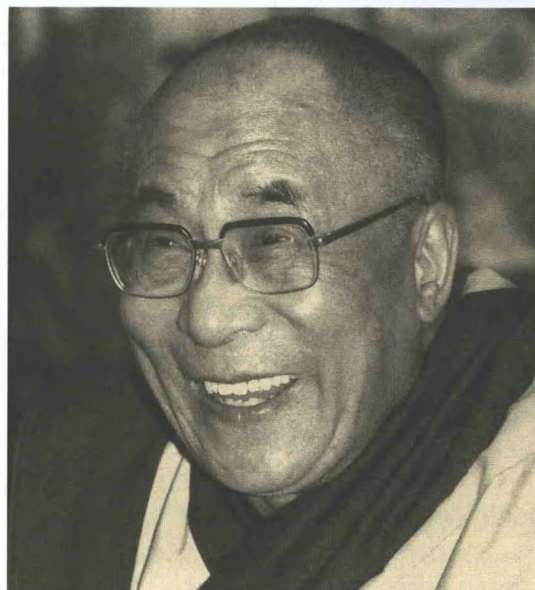
Finally, it is always helpful if you can keep our work in your prayers. Thank you, and may all beings be happy! ☸

Alison Murdoch is Director of Universal Compassion and Wisdom for Peace (UCWP).



Forgiveness

Desmond Tutu: "To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest."



Kindness

His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Patron of UCWP: "This is my religion. There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. Our own mind, our own heart is our temple; the philosophy is kindness."