

LAMRIM YEAR

MAKING LIFE MEANINGFUL DAY BY DAY



LAMA YESHE AND
LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE



The Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive

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A screenshot of the homepage of the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive website. The header features the website's name and a yellow navigation bar with links for "DONATE", "Teachings", "Teachers", "Books & eBooks", "Image Gallery", "Membership & Support", and "About". The main banner image shows two smiling Buddhist monks, one in a red robe and one in a maroon robe, against a backdrop of mountains. Below the banner, the text "WELCOME TO THE LAMA YESHE WISDOM ARCHIVE" and "The Archive of the Nyingma" is displayed, along with a "Get Started" button. The footer section, titled "WHAT'S NEW ON OUR WEBSITE", includes three thumbnail images: "Getting Started" (a monk in a yellow robe), "The Three Principal Aspects of the Path" (two monks in maroon robes), and "E-letter No. 147: August-September 2015" (two monks in maroon robes). Each thumbnail has a brief description below it.

LAMRIM YEAR



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May whoever sees, touches, reads, remembers, or talks or thinks about these books never be reborn in unfortunate circumstances, receive only rebirths in situations conducive to the perfect practice of Dharma, meet only perfectly qualified spiritual guides, quickly develop bodhicitta and immediately attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.



LAMA YESHE & LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

LAMRIM YEAR

Making Life Meaningful Day by Day



Compiled and edited by Alison Murdoch
with Sandra Smith

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INTRODUCTION TO *LAMRIM* YEAR

The most important thing is the continuity of developing your mind in the lamrim, the stages of the path to enlightenment. It doesn't matter if you are in Africa, Tibet, on the moon, in Iraq or wherever, whether you are rich or poor: continue to develop your mind in the lamrim. That is the most important thing. —LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

LAMRIM YEAR is a standalone one-year study program for anyone who wants to taste the essence of this ancient and powerful set of Buddhist teachings. It is inspired by Lama Zopa Rinpoche's advice to the students of Amitabha Buddhist Centre, Singapore, in April 2013 to meditate on the lamrim teachings over the period of a year, commencing with two months' study of guru devotion.

The 365-day outline and interdependent elements of *Lamrim Year* provide a clear and practical structure that is suitable for both individual and group study and will support students of various capabilities in establishing and maintaining a regular lamrim meditation practice.

The quote at the top of each page is both an introduction to and a summary of the day's meditation topic. The text on each page summarizes the key points of the lamrim topic according to the outline of the renowned book, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* by Pabongka Rinpoche. Along with the accompanying quote, it has been selected from the published or unpublished teachings of either Lama Yeshe or Lama Zopa Rinpoche and offers a taste of their teaching style and scope.

The three recaps below the text summarize the key points from each paragraph, providing a quick and practical way for students to review their understanding of the material. The references in italics at the bottom of each page closely follow the outline of *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*. They provide a point of reference and navigational guide through the lamrim topics, from beginning to end.

Sources are listed on the LYWA website for students who wish to explore the material more deeply.

In addition to following the individual lamrim topics, Rinpoche recommends reciting at least one complete lamrim overview each day. One such overview—*The Foundation of All Good Qualities*—is included in the appendix to *Lamrim Year*. Others can be found in the lamrim section of the FPMT website at www.fpmt.org. Rinpoche's advice is to do effortful meditation on the lamrim again and again until stable realizations are achieved.

The ultimate aspiration of *Lamrim Year* is to inspire and support people at all stages on the Buddhist path to put the lamrim into practice and to gain lasting realizations, thereby creating the cause for peace and happiness for themselves and all living beings.

The lamrim contains everything we need to take us all the way to the ultimate state of enlightenment. In fact, I can definitely say that the lamrim is the very essence of the Dharma. —LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

EDITOR'S PREFACE

My suggestion would be to divide the twelve months of the year into lamrim meditations and then meditate on each subject for one month or two weeks to finish the whole lamrim in one year. . . . To meditate like this each year, wow, wow, wow! That would be great. Your life would be so rich and you would be getting closer to realization and closer to enlightenment. . . . At the time of death you can be happy and satisfied that you spent enough of your life practicing Dharma. —LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

WHEN I FIRST came across this advice from Lama Zopa Rinpoche during the summer of 2013, it immediately struck a chord. “Great! That’s my new year’s resolution!” I thought. On January 1, 2014, I sat down on my cushion with Pabongka Rinpoche’s *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, full of virtuous excitement at the prospect of working my way through the lamrim over the coming year. For a few days I conscientiously followed my new routine, identifying suitable passages from the substantial volume in front of me and doing my best to listen, reflect and meditate on their meaning. Then I missed a day, started again, missed another day, then missed a few days in a row, and eventually had to admit that I’d lost momentum and sadly it just wasn’t going to happen.

Four months later I found myself in eastern Oregon, USA. Following an FPMT Inc. meeting in Portland, my husband and I decided to spend a few days exploring cowboy country. Late one afternoon we followed a dirt track down a lonely canyon in our little red rental car and just before sunset reached a small settlement where time seemed to have stood still. Apparently we were the first overseas guests at the town motel since some German engineers the year before. What would it be like to live in such an isolated place? I wondered. Where would I find my inspiration? In the town’s general store I found an answer, in the form of a small lilac-covered book: a “Daily Devotional” of spiritual quotes and stories for each day of the year.

That’s when I had the idea to create a Buddhist version of this homely volume:

a 365-page daily route map through the lamrim that would consist entirely of extracts from the teachings of Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche, and provide the best possible chance of fulfilling Rinpoche's advice in the rough and tumble of modern life.

My first step was to gather together Lama's and Rinpoche's lamrim teachings, both published and unpublished, and identify suitable passages that aligned with the outline provided by *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*. I was fascinated to discover how even the most radical of Lama's teachings generally presented a traditional line of reasoning—albeit in his own unique style and language. I marvelled afresh at the ability of Lama and Rinpoche to dissect the problems of modern life with such dazzling precision, and their ever-imaginative use of storytelling and metaphor (even in a second language) to patiently reiterate the same points over and over again. There was so much compelling material that it often seemed an impossible task to choose the most appropriate text for each page—a pearl among pearls—and add it to the garland.

Just as the lamrim teachings themselves can lift us up and cast us down, my two years of working on this volume both plunged me into despair and filled me with rejoicing. After over thirty years "in the Dharma" I was horrified to see how many topics I'd avoided, how few I'd understood, and even how little I had absorbed when I revisited passages that I'd been working on the previous month. It was a humbling experience of the many obstacles to Dharma study and practice. A late night or a grumpy mood made it almost impossible to progress the work, whereas saying extra prayers, making offerings or carrying out practical kindnesses for others would suddenly restore my flow. As the task neared completion I felt distraught, my only comfort being that I eagerly looked forward to making daily use of *Lamrim Year* myself.

I hope and pray that this volume will prove similarly powerful and meaningful for you. May the profound methods and extraordinary wisdom of these teachings assist each of us in deepening our understanding and practice so that we can swiftly lead ourselves and all other beings out of suffering to perfect and unassailable happiness and peace.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

LAMRIM YEAR wouldn't exist without the generous encouragement and support of Nick Ribush, founder and executive director of the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive. Nick not only embraced the idea immediately but provided unfettered access to the enormous wealth of material contained in the Archive. Although a wonderful job has been done of organizing and preserving that material, I'm excited by how much is still waiting to be edited and shared. Huge thanks to Nick and to all the LYWA team and benefactors for the life-changing opportunity I've had to work on this project and for the extraordinary role you've played in preserving the teachings of Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche for future generations.

When Sandy Smith kindly agreed to get involved with *Lamrim Year*, her professional skills, decades of Buddhist study and rigorous approach took the project to a whole new level. As our emails whizzed back and forth between Australia and the UK, it was a joy to work together on what we hope might prove to be a whole new genre for FPMT publications. I am also indebted to Gordon McDougall, who as editor of the FPMT Lineage Series is probably more familiar with the lamrim teachings in the Archive than anyone else, and has been unstinting in his patient and good-natured support.

Lamrim Year is dedicated to the long lives of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Tenzin Ösel Hita, the recognized reincarnation of Lama Yeshe. Without our teachers we are lost. May their lamrim teachings open our hearts, dispel all our misconceptions, and empower us to bring about a world full of peace and happiness.

Alison Murdoch,
Frome, UK
January 2021

DAY 1



THE LAMRIM IS THE MAIN ROAD,
THE DIRECT HIGHWAY TO ENLIGHTENMENT
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

THE FULL RESPONSIBILITY of each of us is to free every sentient being from suffering and its cause and bring them to enlightenment, by ourselves alone. In order to do this, we first need to attain enlightenment ourselves; we need to achieve the omniscient mind that sees all sentient beings directly. Then we can read sentient beings' individual minds, see all their characteristics, levels of mind and karma, and know all the methods that will suit even one sentient being's mind to lead that being from happiness to happiness to full enlightenment.

To reach enlightenment ourselves, we need to actualize the path, which doesn't happen without cause and conditions. That is, we need to actualize the steps of the path to enlightenment, to follow the graduated path to enlightenment, the lamrim. That's the only way to complete the path. And to bring realizations, the steps of the path have to be practiced in the right order. By just meditating on the bits we like and avoiding the bits we don't—like the sufferings of the three lower realms, impermanence and death, and the suffering nature of samsara and life—by not thinking about or meditating on what we feel to be unpleasant, not putting these teachings into practice, and focusing only on the parts that sound good, we can't really achieve any realizations.

For example, without meditating on samsara as only in the nature of suffering, without feeling as if we're caught in a fire or trapped in a tank of raw sewage or sitting naked in a thorn bush, we can't develop total aversion to samsara or renunciation of it. Without that, we can't realize compassion for other sentient beings or bodhicitta, and therefore we can't enter the Mahayana path. In other words, we have to achieve the realizations of the graduated path to enlightenment.

- To free all beings from suffering we must first achieve enlightenment ourselves
- Every topic in the lamrim needs to be practiced, and in the right order
- This is the only way to achieve realizations and complete the Mahayana path



THE LAMRIM reveals our ignorance, desire, hatred and ego and demonstrates how these negative minds result in complications and misery. Each lamrim meditation is an antidote to a certain delusion and helps us eliminate it.

I tell you, Buddhism is something really scientific and practical, and the lamrim is like an apple, ready to eat—we can nourish ourselves simply by consuming it. If every morning we do a short meditation with good understanding and the strong motivation of wanting to help others, I truly believe our entire day will unfold very smoothly. It's that simple. Normally, how much energy do we expend in trying to make ourselves happy? For example, we spend months and months, years and years, in school studying all kind of things, but we don't put energy into something that will actually make us happy. It's so silly. However, we can change our way of thinking and our entire life, and that is the beauty of Buddhadharma, which shows us how to change our life from negative to positive.

Don't believe in something supernatural up there. If we act in a certain way, meditate on certain things, we turn our wisdom on. Each lamrim meditation is like a switch—when we have a particular problem, we turn on the relevant switch and there is light. If we have another problem, we turn on a different switch. We push the right button, the Dharma light comes on and our disaster situation vanishes. It is very scientific, therefore we can do it.

- The lamrim shows us our delusions and gives us meditations to eliminate them
- Buddhism is a realistic and scientific method to change our way of thinking
- Each lamrim meditation is designed to generate wisdom and eliminate suffering



GOING THROUGH the main points of the lamrim outline gives us a wonderful overview of the Buddha's teaching. From it we can see the full array of subjects dealt with by Buddhism and understand the path that all the buddhas followed on their way to enlightenment. Also, as we look at the various divisions of the teaching as shown in the lamrim outline, we can see that everything the Buddha taught is in there; everything we need to receive enlightenment ourselves. Thus, great faith in the teaching arises within us. When we have faith in the teaching of the Buddha, listening to it is much more beneficial.

The great meditators, the highly realized yogis, all followed outlines in their practice. This was their skill; this was how they attained enlightenment quickly. And this is the great treasure that they passed on to their disciples, to people like us. Thus, they have made it easier for us to gain realizations quickly, with less hindrance. When we first encounter the lamrim teachings, neither the teachings themselves nor the outline make much sense to us. But as we continue to practice analytical meditation on the various topics and gain experience of them, even just remembering the outline will give us a fantastic feeling. The entire path, everything the Buddha taught, will come home to us without our having to go through all the countless words. Just bringing the outline to mind will be such a strong, powerful experience.

At the moment, even when we do read the many detailed words, it takes a long time and we don't feel much, but we have to be patient. If we persevere, all will come in time.

- The lamrim outline gives us an overview of all the Buddha's teachings
- All the great meditators of the past used this outline to quickly gain realizations
- We need to be patient: with perseverance we will definitely make progress



GURU DEVOTION, seeing the guru as a buddha, is called “the root of the path” because just as the trunk, branches, leaves and fruit grow from the stable root of a tree, all the realizations of the graduated path to enlightenment grow from stable devotion to the guru. If there is no root, nothing can grow. If we have the stable root of guru devotion, all realizations come quickly.

By being introduced to guru devotion practice first, we become careful from the very beginning not to make mistakes. We then start our Dharma practice, our spiritual life, without mistakes because we have full understanding of the subject of devoting ourselves to the virtuous friend. We understand that this is the root that enables us to successfully actualize the rest of the path. By being educated in this practice from the very beginning, we don’t make mistakes. I think this is why Lama Tsongkhapa put this subject at the very beginning.

Unless we know the importance of correct devotion to the virtuous friend, no matter how much the rest of the path is explained to us, we won’t be successful in actualizing it because, without guru devotion, we will have no way to stop obstacles and no way to receive blessings. With the practice of guru devotion, all our wishes, including our wish to quickly achieve enlightenment, will be fulfilled. Therefore, the teaching on how to devote to the virtuous friend is the most important one, more important than any other teaching. It is the root of all happiness, from now up to enlightenment.

- Guru devotion is called the root of the path because all realizations grow from it
- It comes at the beginning of the lamrim so we can start our spiritual life without mistakes
- Guru devotion is the most important of all teachings and is the source of all happiness

WHY DO we need a guru? Because in order to cure our diseased minds, we need the help of someone who knows how to do it. Since it is extremely difficult to understand how the mind works, we need the guidance of an expert in this area. Furthermore, gaining liberation, or inner freedom, is not an easy thing. Everything we have ever said or done on this trip we call life has had its origin in the mind, and in the same way, the entire path to liberation and enlightenment depends on the mind.

However, if we think of all our life's experiences, how convinced are we that they have all come from the mind? In order to really understand how this is true, we need someone with the right kind of knowledge to explain it to us. In other words, we need a guru. If we just think about this in a superficial way, we'll probably say to ourselves, "I know what I want; I know what my life's about." We might think we know, but we really don't. We think environmental pollution comes from industry, but where does industry come from? It's a creation of the human mind. In the same way, all the world's confusion—from that of societies to that of the individual—is mind-created.

If people could simply imbue their minds with peaceful tranquility and loving kindness, none of the world problems we see around us would arise. To achieve this, we have to employ a method that brings that result. Since we don't know what such methods are or how to put them into practice, we need an experienced teacher to show us that reality.

- In order to cure our diseased minds, we need expert guidance in how the mind works
- All the confusion of the world, from society to the individual, is created by the mind
- We need an experienced teacher to help us develop tranquility and loving kindness



THE MOMENT we establish Dharma contact with someone with the recognition of a guru-disciple relationship, that person becomes the most powerful object in our life, more powerful than numberless buddhas. Once we recognize someone as our guru, as the person we will rely upon to guide us to the happiness of future lives, liberation and enlightenment, and ourselves as their disciple, that person becomes the most powerful object for us. So, it's a mental thing. The power is created by our making that decision to recognize someone as our guru and then making Dharma contact with that recognition. The power comes from the Dharma contact, not from whether or not the person is an enlightened being.

When we make the decision to form a guru-disciple relationship with someone, the Dharma connection can be established by our receiving a teaching, an initiation, vows, or simply the oral transmission of OM MANI PADME HUM or a single verse of Dharma. The Dharma connection doesn't come simply from hearing the teaching or being there for an initiation or vows, but from doing so with the recognition of the person as our guru and us as their disciple.

The meeting of two atoms to produce nuclear power can be constructive, as in medical treatment and the generation of electricity, or destructive, as in an atomic bomb. The meeting of a guru and disciple is similar. If we are careful and practice guru devotion well, we can accumulate the greatest merit in the shortest time, but if we are not careful and make even a small mistake in our practice of guru devotion, we can experience the heaviest suffering for the longest time.

- The person we recognize as our guru becomes the most powerful object in our life
- The Dharma connection comes from receiving teachings as a disciple of the guru
- The quality of our guru devotion will determine whether it brings merit or suffering

Guru devotion

1 Devoting to the guru

1.1 The power of the guru

DAY 7



THERE IS THE NEED FOR AN ORGANIC, LIVING KIND
OF FORCE TO COME IN TOUCH WITH OUR HEART
—LAMA YESHE

THE MAIN reason that religion in both the East and the West has degenerated so much nowadays is the rarity of meeting good spiritual examples. If people never meet highly realized beings they have no way of knowing the limitless possibilities of their own human consciousness. It is not enough that there are texts recording the deeds and accomplishments of past masters. By themselves, such stories cannot inspire us very much. In fact, they may only increase our feeling of remoteness: “Buddha and Jesus lived such a long time ago,” we may think, “and their purity belongs to another age. It is impossible for someone like myself living in this degenerate twenty-first century to attain anything resembling their level of purity.”

The only way we can lay to rest these feelings of doubt, incapability and cynicism is by coming face to face with someone who has activated their highest potential. Only then do we have an example of purity and spiritual evolution we can actually see and relate to ourselves. Thus the outer guru is of utmost importance. We need the example of someone who, while human like ourselves, has developed beyond the bounds of what we presently think possible.

When we see someone who has reached beyond selfishness, who has transcended the petty concerns of this world while still living in the world, who speaks and acts from intuitive wisdom and who is truly dedicated to the welfare of others, then we can have faith and conviction that these attainments are possible for ourselves as well.

- Religion has degenerated because of the rarity of meeting highly realized beings
- We need the example of someone who has developed beyond what we think is possible
- Seeing the great qualities of others gives us faith that we can have the same attainments

Guru devotion

1 Devoting to the guru

1.2 The qualities of the guru

DAY 8



A SPIRITUAL FRIEND NEEDS TO BE WISE IN LEADING
THE DISCIPLE ON THE PATH TO FUTURE LIVES'
HAPPINESS, TO A PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH
AND THEN TO NIRVANA AND FULL ENLIGHTENMENT
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

To achieve enlightenment, we have to complete the realizations of the graduated path. There are many levels of realizations that we have to receive and there are many delusions that we have to eliminate. So, to be able to make this aim successful, it is not sufficient to have a teacher who knows just one technique like single-pointed concentration but has no idea of other meditations; who knows only how to teach breathing meditation, but has no idea of others. It's not sufficient.

To teach on the graduated path, first the teacher must have perfect understanding, or at least correct understanding, no misunderstanding. The most perfect thing is having the experience. If a teacher doesn't have perfect understanding of the higher graduated path, that teacher can't show it to us and can't lead us to enlightenment. If a teacher doesn't have perfect understanding of the teaching of the graduated path for the middle being, that teacher can't show that teaching and can't lead us even to the cessation of samsara. They can't lead us even to the lower nirvana. They can't make us, the disciples, free from samsara.

Understanding refuge and karma is among the most important things. If the teacher doesn't have that basic understanding of the teachings on the lower graduated path, there's no way they can save the disciple from the suffering of the lower realms. If what the teacher does is opposite to good karma—the virtuous action, moral action—if that's the path that they show, there is no way to help the disciple to be happy even in the present life.

- If our aim is to achieve enlightenment, we need a teacher with many levels of realization
- Our teacher must have perfect understanding of both the higher and middle being paths
- To save us from the lower realms they must also show us the teachings of the lower path

Guru devotion

1 Devoting to the guru

1.2 The qualities of the guru



A DISCIPLE'S ACHIEVEMENT of enlightenment depends upon both the guru and the disciple. The guru should be someone who is perfectly qualified to lead the disciple in the complete path to enlightenment, but if the disciple doesn't have the fortune to be led in this path, they won't become enlightened. If the guru is perfectly qualified and the disciple also has the fortune to be led in the complete path, enlightenment comes very easily.

In *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, Pabongka Dechen Nyingpo mentions five qualities that a disciple should have. A good disciple is *impartial, intelligent and hardworking, has great respect for their guru and listens carefully to their guru's instructions*. If we're impartial, we're able to examine and understand other views. If we're willing to check both sides of an argument, we have the opportunity to learn through clarifying what is right and what is wrong. If we're biased toward our own wrong beliefs, on the other hand, we never even allow ourselves to examine other views and thus have no opportunity to learn; we don't listen to what is said and don't allow ourselves to examine and understand the teachings. For example, if we take reincarnation to be complete nonsense, no matter how much it is explained using logic and quotations, we won't even take the time to understand the teachings on it. We will stubbornly hold to our own wrong view.

When we make a *tsatsa* from a perfect mold, the image of a buddha comes out easily and perfectly in the clay, without any details missing. In a similar way, enlightenment comes easily and perfectly to a qualified disciple.

- A disciple's achievement of enlightenment depends upon both the guru and the disciple
- A good disciple is *impartial, intelligent, hardworking and respectful* and *listens to instructions*
- Enlightenment comes easily and perfectly to a qualified disciple

Guru devotion

1 Devoting to the guru

1.3 The qualities of the disciple



OUR PRACTICE of guru devotion in this life is incredibly important because the greatest profit and the greatest loss are related to correctly devoting ourselves to the virtuous friend and to making mistakes in relation to the virtuous friend respectively. If we are careful to correctly devote ourselves to the virtuous friend from the very beginning, when we first establish Dharma contact, we will experience fewer shortcomings later.

We need to understand and study well the lamrim teachings on the benefits of correct devotion and the shortcomings of incorrect devotion and then to practice as perfectly as we can. Practicing guru devotion correctly in this life determines whether or not we meet a virtuous friend in our future lives and whether or not that virtuous friend will be perfectly qualified. We must be most careful about these points in order to protect ourselves from all these dangers and shortcomings, now and in the future, and in order to have success, now and in the future.

By knowing the benefits of correct devotion to the virtuous friend, we see the importance of relying upon the virtuous friend and all the profit to be gained from doing so. If we don't know the shortcomings, we won't be careful in correctly devoting ourselves to the virtuous friend because we won't see the importance of it. In that way we will create more obstacles. We see how extremely important it is to be careful, because if we do this practice well, there will be no obstacles to the success of our temporary wishes or to our accomplishment of the path to enlightenment.

- If we devote correctly from the beginning we will have fewer shortcomings later
- We must understand, study and practice the guru devotion teachings as well as we can
- Knowing the benefits of correct devotion inspires us to take great care in our practice

Guru devotion

2 The benefits of correct devotion to a guru



WITHOUT a guru, there is no way we can end our samsara. If we never meet a guru, the time of our achieving enlightenment will never come. But if we rely upon a guru who shows the infallible path, our own samsara, even though it is beginningless, can have an end. By meeting a guru and following their advice, we will quickly achieve enlightenment.

When we meditate on this first benefit, we should relate it to every single activity that we do, whether daily practice, retreat or serving others. In our daily life, every single time we carry out our guru's advice—and here we're not talking about just sitting meditation—we accumulate the most extensive merit, perform the greatest purification and become that much closer to enlightenment. With each task that we do, we lessen our negative karma—the cause of the lower realms—and our obscurations become thinner, so we become closer to enlightenment. Each piece of advice that we follow brings powerful purification because the virtuous friend is the most powerful object in our life. We should remember all the practices and advice the guru has given us and relate our meditation to them.

In our daily life we become closer to enlightenment each time we are able to carry out a piece of advice given to us by our virtuous friend, each time we are able to practice the teachings. If we are aware of this benefit we will see that we are gaining inconceivable merit all the time we are following our guru's advice. Our life then becomes extremely enjoyable.

- Relying on a guru who shows the infallible path means our own samsara can have an end
- All the activities we do for the guru accumulate merit and purify our negative karma
- Every time we follow the guru's advice we become closer to enlightenment

Guru devotion

2. The benefits of correct devotion to a guru

2.1 We become closer to enlightenment

2.1.1 We become closer to enlightenment by practicing the advice given by our guru



WE BECOME closer to enlightenment not only by practicing the advice given us by our guru but even by making offerings to our guru, showing them respect and serving them. This is because in order to achieve enlightenment we need to accumulate extensive merit and the supreme merit field is the virtuous friend. If we make offerings to our guru we can accumulate in a moment the extensive merit that would take an inconceivable number of eons to accumulate through following any other path.

Sacrificing ourselves by making charity of our body and even our life to other sentient beings for one thousand eons, a great length of time, is incredible. But, as far as finishing the work of accumulating merit is concerned, simply offering one glass of water to a virtuous friend accumulates as much merit. We create infinite merit and this infinite merit is received through the kindness of our guru, through our having a guru-disciple relationship with them.

We have so many incredible opportunities to collect merit; we don't have to make offerings only far away in the East. Even by making offerings to the guru's "pores"—to any being who is related to or belongs to our guru—we collect more merit than from having made offerings to numberless buddhas. Also, our offering doesn't need to be only food. It can include supporting the meditation center itself, through a building project or something similar. We are then helping all the students of the center and everyone who comes there to learn Dharma. This naturally becomes an offering.

- The guru is the supreme field through which we accumulate extensive merit
- Simply offering one glass of water to the guru creates unimaginable merit
- We also collect merit by offering to the pores of the guru and by supporting a center

Guru devotion

2 The benefits of correct devotion to a guru

2.1 We become closer to enlightenment

2.1.2 We become closer to enlightenment by making offerings to our guru

WHENEVER WE are able to offer service to our guru we are fortunate beings, because everything we do, from morning to night, is following the guru's advice. On this basis we accumulate unbelievable merit. If we are working at a job that the guru has given us—whether cleaning toilets, building houses or even running a business—it is easy for us to think that our purpose in being alive is to serve the guru.

If we remember the benefits explained in the sutra and tantra teachings, any work we do for the guru becomes very effective for our mind, just like reading scriptures or doing meditation, and even enjoyable, because we are confident of the result we will receive from it. No matter how hard the work, our motivation for doing it will easily become Dharma. Otherwise, if we don't relate the practice of guru yoga to our own work, instead of working for the guru we'll be working for ourselves. Our motivation will become egocentric, we'll get physically and mentally exhausted, and the work we're doing won't make much sense to us. Then there's the danger that we will lose our faith and generate heresy and other kinds of negative thoughts, which throw us into the hells.

When we have been working hard to serve our guru, we should feel great happiness. We don't have to worry that we don't have time to meditate or do prostrations or any of the other preliminary practices. Whatever wish we have will be fulfilled without hindrance: it's a natural process, a dependent arising.

- Whenever we offer service to our guru we accumulate unbelievable merit
- Remembering these benefits makes our work for the guru very effective and enjoyable
- All our wishes are fulfilled without hindrance as a natural result of serving the guru

Guru devotion

2 The benefits of correct devotion to a guru

2.1 We become closer to enlightenment

2.1.3 We become closer to enlightenment by serving our guru



JUST AS a mother is very happy when she sees someone helping her beloved child, all the buddhas are pleased when we devote ourselves correctly to our virtuous friend. Even though the person doesn't actually help the mother, she is still extremely pleased that her child is receiving help. Similarly, if we correctly follow our guru's advice, which is the main service, and make offerings and so forth, all the buddhas are extremely pleased with us from their hearts.

Why is this? Because the guru is the embodiment of all the buddhas. In order to subdue our mind, all the buddhas manifested in this particular aspect, in accord with our karma or, in other words, our merit. If we correctly follow our virtuous friend, even without needing to be invoked, all the buddhas living in all the directions will happily abide in our guru's holy body and accept our offerings.

Offering the guru even one cup of tea is like having actually made offering to all the buddhas, but the benefit is much greater. As Pabongka Dechen Nyingpo points out, if we make an offering to the buddhas of the three times, we gain the benefit of having made the offering, but we can't be sure that the buddhas actually accept our offering with pleased holy minds. However, by making an offering to the guru, we receive both the benefit of having made an offering to all the buddhas and of having the offering accepted. In this way we are able to quickly finish the work of accumulating merit.

- By correctly following our guru's advice, all the buddhas are extremely pleased with us
- If we correctly follow our virtuous friend, all the buddhas will abide in their body
- Offering one cup of tea to the guru is more beneficial than offering to all the buddhas

Guru devotion

2 The benefits of correct devotion to a guru

2.2 We please all the buddhas



BY CORRECTLY devoting ourselves to our virtuous friend through thought and action, allowing ourselves to be under the control of the virtuous friend, then we won't be harmed by *maras* or evil friends. Because of our strong devotion, we purify inconceivable obscurations and past negative karma and accumulate extensive merit; non-human beings, such as the *devas* and spirits who disturb the practice of virtue, and even human beings cannot then harm us. Even the four elements—earth, water, fire and air—cannot give us harm.

Generally speaking, someone with a lot of merit has much power and cannot be harmed by others, even though others might dislike the person and want to harm them. Such a practitioner has much success in their practice, in achieving realizations. However, when our level of merit becomes low because we create some heavy negative karma or stop creating extensive merit, we experience a lot of problems in our life. Human and non-human beings are then able to harm us.

There are two types of maras: inner and outer. Inner maras are delusion and karma. Outer maras are worldly beings who cause delusions to increase, such as *nagas*, *devas* and various types of spirits. They can also be human beings, “evil friends.” When we practice correct devotion to our virtuous friend, we can't be harmed by evil friends because we're following our virtuous friend and not the evil ones. Because of that, even evil friends can't be a bad influence and lead us in the wrong path.

- Correctly devoting to the guru with thought and action protects us from harm
- A person with a lot of merit has much power and cannot be harmed by others
- With correct devotion, neither karma, delusions, spirits nor evil friends can harm us

Guru devotion

2 The benefits of correct devotion to a guru

2.3 We are not harmed by maras or evil friends



As we understand what is to be practiced and what is to be abandoned, we are able to give up wrong conduct. Either because we follow our teacher's example or because we practice correct devotion from our own side, all our disturbing thoughts and negative actions are naturally stopped. When we are following a guru, we allow ourselves to be under their control instead of that of our delusions.

Because of the teacher, the disciples will naturally become pure Dharma practitioners, leaving behind all concern for happiness, comfort, food, clothing and reputation. When the thought of worldly concern is left behind, the disciples will tend not to generate delusions and create negative karma. If teachers are strict in the practice of virtue, rather than eating, sleeping and enjoying themselves all the time, they will always attempt, day and night, not to waste time, and stay up late at night practicing virtue. Such teachers' disciples will also continuously attempt to practice virtue and not spend much time on the pleasures of this life.

If a virtuous teacher is a great learned being who has done extensive listening and reflecting, the disciples of that teacher will also have extensive understanding of what is to be practiced and what is to be avoided. If the teacher is strict in moral conduct, abstaining from vices with their three doors, the teacher's disciples will also naturally be careful in moral conduct. Good disciples will automatically be like their teacher, renouncing even small vices. In this way, delusions and wrong actions will naturally cease.

- When we follow a guru correctly, our negative thoughts and actions naturally cease
- If our guru practices virtue and avoids worldly concerns, we will follow their example
- Good disciples will automatically be like their teacher, renouncing even small vices

Guru devotion

2 The benefits of correct devotion to a guru

2.4 All our delusions and negative actions naturally cease



WHEN WE follow the virtuous friend correctly, even if we don't meditate much, realizations will be generated spontaneously, effortlessly. The quickest way to achieve realizations is to do what most pleases the holy mind of the virtuous friend, which means following their advice.

We normally have such questions as “How can I gain realizations quickly?” or “How can I develop my mind quickly in the path to enlightenment?” but somehow we don't think of this section of the lamrim, which contains the answer. Our answer is normally not this basic one, but that we need to do more retreat or some other practice. We don't know or we forget that it is guru devotion practice that made it possible for the past and present practitioners to achieve realizations quickly. We think that some other practice will enable us to achieve realizations quickly, but it doesn't work.

Even though a person might be very foolish, if they have indestructible devotion they have the most important thing in life. It looks a little strange to say that generating realizations depends on devotion to the guru rather than on understanding teachings. It seems illogical, but it's something that we can clearly understand through our own experiences. When the water of devotion to the guru has dried up, our mind is like a rock. Our meditation doesn't touch our heart and isn't really effective for our mind. At other times, when we have more devotion and really feel the kindness of the guru from our heart, any meditation we try is very effective and very powerful.

- Realizations occur spontaneously and effortlessly when we follow the guru correctly
- Guru devotion is the key to developing our mind quickly in the path to enlightenment
- We can see how devotion makes our meditation very effective and powerful

Guru devotion

2 The benefits of correct devotion to a guru

2.5 All our realizations of the paths and bhumis increase



KADAMPA GESHE CHAYULWA was an incomparable practitioner and disciple who correctly devoted to the virtuous friend, following the guru perfectly. If he was doing his mandala offering, piling up the mandala to create merit, and his guru called him, the moment he heard his guru's voice, he would immediately stop his mandala offering and run to his guru. If he was writing something, for example, the Tibetan letter *na*, the moment he heard his guru's voice, he wouldn't even wait to finish that letter but would immediately run to his guru's room to offer service. He had unbelievable devotion.

Geshe Chayulwa cleaned his guru's room every day, collecting the garbage in his lower robe, his *shemthab*, holding the robe in one hand and going down the steps to throw it out. One day he collected the garbage, put it in his shemthab and went down the stairs as usual, but when he reached the third step he gained a realization. His level of mind reached the path of merit and of that path's three levels—lower, middle and great—the great path of merit. Then, just there, because his mind had become purer, he suddenly saw numberless buddhas in their *nirmanakaya* aspect.

We think that we can attain realizations only by doing formal meditation, with our eyes closed, but it's not like that. In his great commentary, Pabongka Rinpoche has cited many stories of guru devotion, correctly devoting to the virtuous friend, that illustrate how many practitioners have achieved realizations by actively serving their guru rather than by sitting on a meditation cushion.

- Geshe Chayulwa was an incomparable practitioner who followed his guru perfectly
- He attained the great path of merit while going down the steps with his guru's garbage
- It is a mistake to think that formal meditation is the only way to achieve realizations

Guru devotion

2 The benefits of correct devotion to a guru

The story of Geshe Chayulwa



GURU DEVOTION in our future lives could be easy—with our easily meeting a perfect guru and succeeding in our guru devotion practice—or difficult—with our not even finding a guru or making many mistakes when we do. How perfectly we can practice guru devotion in our future lives depends on how skillful we are at devoting ourselves to our virtuous friends in this life. And how it is turning out in this life has to do with our past lives, with our past karma.

For example, in Dharamsala in India, where His Holiness the Dalai Lama and many other lamas live and give many teachings, not everyone comes to the teachings. Even though they live close to the lamas, even in the same town, many people never come to listen to the Dharma. His Holiness, an actual living buddha, is there, but somehow they still can't realize it. They have no interest in or are unable to come to the teachings.

So many people cannot find a guru who can teach them how to create the unmistakable cause for even the happiness of future lives, let alone enlightenment. We should appreciate how fortunate we are and how precious this opportunity is. Otherwise, it becomes commonplace, like having breakfast or lunch every day. It's amazing, like a dream, that we have the karma even to meet such qualified teachers, let alone be able to hear complete teachings from them. We should rejoice in how fortunate we are. And because of our good fortune, we should continue to practice as much as possible.

- Our future practice of guru devotion depends on how skillfully we devote in this life
- For example, in Dharamsala in India, many people never come to listen to the Dharma
- We should rejoice at our good fortune and make best use of this precious opportunity

Guru devotion

2 The benefits of correct devotion to a guru

2.6 We will never lack virtuous friends in all our future lives



WHEN WE correctly devote ourselves to the guru, all the heavy negative karma to be reborn in the lower realms, such as the five uninterrupted negative karmas, can be completely purified in the shortest time—even in an instant. Instead of our having to be born in the lower realms and experience there the heaviest suffering for an incredible length of time, we completely purify our negative karma through experiencing disease, famine or some other difficulty in this life. All that heavy negative karma can be purified even by having a terrifying dream or by being scolded by our guru, as in Milarepa's life story.

No matter how much heavy karma we have created in this and past lives, correctly devoting ourselves to the virtuous friend is the answer. What is the most powerful method of purification? Again, the answer is correct devotion to the virtuous friend, because the virtuous friend is the most powerful among all the powerful objects.

By practicing perfect guru yoga, we can purify the heavy negative karma that would cause us to be born in hell and suffer there for many eons by experiencing just a headache, a toothache or some other small problem in this life. We have to realize that the more problems we experience in doing the guru's work, the more negative karma and obscurations we purify and the more merit we accumulate. In other words, by thinking of the benefits, we should see any difficulty we experience in doing the guru's work as a good thing and as something we need.

- Guru devotion can purify our heaviest negative karmas in the shortest time
- Correct devotion to the virtuous friend is the most powerful method of purification
- The more problems we experience doing the guru's work, the greater the purification

Guru devotion

2 The benefits of correct devotion to a guru

2.7 We will not fall into the lower realms



As a result of carrying out our guru's advice and serving them, all our wishes for temporary and ultimate happiness are quickly fulfilled. Correctly devoting ourselves to the guru establishes the root of all future happiness, including enlightenment. Everything—the works for self and other sentient beings—succeeds and we quickly become enlightened. In short, all the multitudes of goodness we experience in this and future lives depend on correct devotion to the guru.

If we do a retreat, we're able to complete the retreat and it is very successful. If we're studying, we're able to continue our studies without obstacles and study well. How much success we have in our study of Dharma, how much opportunity we get to study and to successfully complete our study depends on our practice of guru devotion. The same applies to living in ordination.

How extensively we can benefit sentient beings and the teachings of Buddha in this life and in future lives also depends on how correctly we devote ourselves to our virtuous friends. Lama Atisha, Dromtönpa, Milarepa, Lama Tsongkhapa and so many of the past pandits and yogis were able to offer incredible benefit to sentient beings and the teachings because of their perfect practice of guru devotion. Lama Atisha himself said, "I have many gurus but I haven't done a single thing that those gurus disliked." That is why Lama Atisha was able to bring benefit as extensive as the sky to the teachings and to sentient beings in both India and Tibet. Even nowadays Lama Atisha's holy actions are still working for us.

- Correctly devoting ourselves to the guru establishes the root of all future happiness
- All success in doing retreat, studying or living in ordination depends on guru devotion
- Perfect guru devotion gave teachers such as Lama Atisha their capacity to benefit others

Guru devotion

2 The benefits of correct devotion to a guru

2.8 We will effortlessly achieve all our temporary and ultimate wishes



AFTER MEETING a virtuous teacher who reveals the unmistaken path, if we devote ourselves to them correctly, we gain all the eight benefits mentioned in the texts. Thus we can easily see that if we don't rely upon a virtuous friend at all, we don't receive those eight benefits, which itself is a powerful shortcoming. And if we have established a relationship with a virtuous friend but devote ourselves to them incorrectly and don't confess and change our negative thoughts and actions, we experience eight shortcomings.

Without understanding the complete teachings on the eight shortcomings of incorrectly devoting ourselves to a guru, we have no way to practice, no way to face and stop our wrong conceptions. How much effort we put into avoiding the eight shortcomings depends on how much we understand their importance. Doing the practice is our own responsibility. If we do a lot of Dharma practice—studying, doing preliminaries or retreat, reciting many mantras—but continuously make mistakes in our devotion and displease our virtuous friend, we create a great obstacle. There is no greater obstacle than this.

Even though electricity seems insignificant, if we are not careful with it, we can endanger our own life. Similarly, even though we can obtain the greatest benefit in relation to the guru, we can also create the greatest suffering. Even a small mistake made in relation to the guru becomes a great obstacle to developing our mind in the path to enlightenment, to achieving our own happiness from this life up to enlightenment.

- If we devote ourselves incorrectly to the virtuous friend we incur eight disadvantages
- We need to understand these disadvantages to face and stop our wrong conceptions
- A small mistake made in relation to the guru becomes a great obstacle to our happiness

*Guru devotion**3 The disadvantages of incorrect devotion to a guru*



HAVING ESTABLISHED a Dharma connection and accepted a guru-disciple relationship, if we then criticize or give up that guru, we incur the same heavy negative karma as having criticized or given up all the buddhas. The Tibetan term, *nyä mö*, has two aspects: the heavier aspect is giving up, or abandoning, the guru as an object of respect of our body, speech and mind; the other aspect is criticizing the guru and generating anger, heresy and other negative thoughts.

This is related to the explanation that the virtuous friend is the essence, or embodiment, of all the buddhas. If we serve or make offering to our virtuous friend, we are serving or making offering to all the buddhas. On the other hand, if we criticize or give up our virtuous friend, it is the same as criticizing or giving up all the buddhas. Leave aside criticizing or disrespecting the lama who reveals Dharma by sitting on a high throne, even doing so to our everyday teacher, the one who taught us to read and with whom we live, becomes in fact criticizing or disrespecting all the buddhas of the ten directions.

Most of us have minds that have been habituated to attachment, anger and all the other delusions during beginningless rebirths. Because of this it is extremely difficult for us to overcome negative thoughts toward the guru. So if we don't practice guru devotion we'll continue to generate negative thoughts toward our guru, especially anger and heresy, the shortcomings of which are very heavy.

- Criticizing or giving up the guru is as harmful as criticizing or giving up all the buddhas
- This is because our guru and even our everyday teacher is the essence of all the buddhas
- By practicing devotion we can stop our habitual negative thoughts toward the guru

Guru devotion

3 The disadvantages of incorrect devotion to a guru

3.1 If we criticize our guru, we criticize all the buddhas



—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

EACH MOMENT of anger toward our guru destroys merit for eons equal in number to the moments of our anger, and will cause us to be reborn in the hells and suffer for the same number of eons. The most dangerous thing is generating anger or heresy toward our guru. The longer we have to be in hell, the more distant we will be from temporary happiness, and from the ultimate happiness of liberation and enlightenment.

Also, our realizations of the path will be delayed for the same number of eons as the moments of our anger. If we are about to realize renunciation, bodhicitta, emptiness or some other realization, and get angry at our guru, our realization will be delayed for eons equal in number to the moments of our anger. Even if the merit has been dedicated, the experience of the result of that merit is delayed for that number of eons.

During all those eons that we are in hell, a whole world system will have evolved, existed, degenerated and become empty several times over. Even when this world has completely disappeared, our own karma to be in hell will still not have finished. From there we will again reincarnate in hell in another of the numberless universes and continue to experience suffering. This is something to keep in mind. Simply meditating on this point is very effective because we can then easily control our disturbing thoughts and avoid creating the heaviest negative karmas, which destroy our liberation and enlightenment and interfere with even our temporary happiness.

- Each moment of anger toward our guru destroys our merit and causes rebirth in the hells
- Our realizations will be delayed for eons equal in number to the moments of our anger
- Meditating on this point enables us to avoid creating these heaviest of negative karmas

Guru devotion

3 The disadvantages of incorrect devotion to a guru

3.2 Anger toward our guru destroys our merit and causes rebirth in the hells



EVEN IF we have been angry at a virtuous friend, criticized or given them up, harmed their holy body, gone against their advice or disturbed their holy mind, we can definitely purify the negative karma we have created to be born in hell. It's not that the negative karma is so heavy that it can never be purified, like in Christianity, where once people are born in hell they are stuck there forever, with no opportunity to change from that realm. Karma is a dependent arising, as is the mind that creates hell. Because karma depends on causes and conditions, it can be changed through other causes and conditions.

There are many ways we can purify the negative karma we have created in relation to the guru. The lamrim teachings advise that if the lama is living, we should immediately confess our mistake to the lama with strong repentance. The best way to purify is, on the basis of confessing our mistake, to then do something that pleases the holy mind of that guru, whether by following some advice that they have given us, offering them service or something else like that. By recognizing our mistake we change our attitude and actions.

If we don't purify the mistakes we have made with the virtuous friend in this life, even if we do meet a virtuous friend in our future lives we will again make the same mistakes, which is creating the result similar to the cause. We will repeat our mistakes again and again and will have no development of mind from life to life.

- Because negative karma is a dependent arising, it can definitely be purified
- The best purification is to confess our mistakes and then follow our guru's instructions
- If we don't purify our mistakes in relation to the guru, we will repeat them in future lives

Guru devotion

3 The disadvantages of incorrect devotion to a guru

3.2 Anger toward our guru destroys our merit and causes rebirth in the hells

Purifying our mistakes



NO MATTER HOW MUCH WE PRACTICE TANTRA,
IF WE HAVE CRITICIZED OUR MASTER FROM THE
HEART WE WON'T ACHIEVE ANY REALIZATIONS IN
THIS LIFE —LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

WHEN WE have made mistakes in our guru devotion practice, even though we practice tantra, we can never achieve enlightenment. No matter how well we understand the tantric path and no matter how many eons we meditate on it, we can never achieve the sublime realization. Until we purify the negative karma accumulated in relation to the guru, no matter how much we practice tantra, there will be no enlightenment.

Those who have criticized their guru from the heart, even if they practice tantra, won't have any achievement. Sometimes a critical thought just comes and goes, but here, *from the heart* means something serious. If we are careless in our relationships with our gurus but on the other hand do hundreds of thousands of prostrations and other practices, nothing will happen in our mind. No realizations will come even if we do retreat on secret, profound tantric meditations for many years in an isolated place. We will have no experiences; our mind will still be the same as before. We will not have even a good sign in a dream.

If we confess and purify, it changes the situation. The whole point is that it is different if we change our attitude, confess our mistake and attempt not to make the mistake again. Otherwise, if we don't change our attitude and don't try not to repeat the mistake, no matter how much we practice tantra we will never achieve the sublime realization. This outline is very important to remember, especially if we feel we have made these mistakes.

- If our guru devotion is faulty, even the practice of tantra won't lead us to enlightenment
- Nothing will change in our mind if we are careless in relating to our virtuous friends
- We must change our attitude, confess our mistakes and try not to repeat them

Guru devotion

3 The disadvantages of incorrect devotion to a guru

3.3 Even though we practice tantra, we will not achieve enlightenment



As a result of having criticized, become angry at or made some other mistake in relation to our guru, as long as we don't confess our mistake or revive the samaya, even attempting to practice tantra for many years by undergoing hardships such as forgoing food and sleep will be like attaining hell and the like. Again, this is not referring just to getting angry at our guru but to giving them up as an object of respect of our three doors.

It is not saying that all this intensive practice becomes the cause of the lower realms, or that we are not collecting merit. Even though such heavy negative thoughts are arising, we may be collecting merit by performing various practices such as making prostrations and offerings to Buddha. Of course, even from the power of the object, such actions become virtue. However, the mountains of negative karma from our negative thoughts toward the guru are so heavy that the good karma we collect becomes insignificant.

If we don't change our thoughts and actions, no matter how hard we practice not just tantra but even Highest Yoga Tantra, the quickest path to enlightenment, because of the mistakes we have made in relation to the virtuous friend, it will be like achieving hell rather than enlightenment. If we have ingested a deadly poison and continue to ingest it, it can become so strong that even taking its antidote has little power to benefit us and we move in the direction of sickness and death. It's similar with this particular result of making mistakes in our guru devotion.

- If we fail to respect our guru, our attempts to practice tantra will be like attaining hell
- The negative karma we collect is so heavy that our good karma becomes insignificant
- It's similar to ingesting a deadly poison that is so strong that even the antidote fails

Guru devotion

3 The disadvantages of incorrect devotion to a guru

3.4 Even if we practice tantra with much hardship, it will be like attaining hell and the like



A FURTHER SHORTCOMING of incorrect devotion is that we will be unable to achieve new scriptural understanding and realizations, and even those qualities we have generated within our mind will degenerate. In this way, incorrect practice of guru devotion is most harmful for the development of our mind. Our previous experiences of compassion, emptiness, renunciation, impermanence and so forth will be lost. Our faith will also degenerate. We will also forget things—we won't even remember very much of the teachings.

When there is no devotion in our heart, our mind is dry and empty, like a hot desert where nothing grows. At that time, there's not the happiness and richness that we feel when we have devotion. When we have no devotion or our devotion is weak, like a thin cloud about to disappear in the sky, we have no feeling for any of the rest of the path. No matter how many times we repeat the words, no matter what lamrim teachings we read, no matter what we meditate on, we feel nothing from our heart. Everything becomes just words.

If we don't correctly devote ourselves to the virtuous friend, our life becomes messy. There is no development in any of our practices. We continuously make mistakes and find it difficult to follow the guru's advice and it is then very difficult for us to develop our mind. Our mind creates many obstacles to being able to follow the guru's advice, which means many obstacles to practicing the path to enlightenment.

- Incorrect practice of guru devotion blocks new realizations and harms the old
- When guru devotion is weak or absent, we have no feeling for the rest of the path
- If we fail to devote correctly there will be no development in any of our practices

Guru devotion

3 The disadvantages of incorrect devotion to a guru

3.5 We will not generate any fresh realizations and those we have will degenerate



IF WE DEVOTE INCORRECTLY TO THE VIRTUOUS FRIEND, EVEN IN THIS LIFE WE WILL BE HARMED BY DISEASE AND MANY OTHER UNDESIRABLE THINGS
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

IT IS very easy for the fortune of those who have degenerated or broken samaya with their guru to go lower and lower. There is then more possibility of them receiving harm from the elements, nonhuman beings, such as spirits, and even human beings. They may also die by suicide. Even if there's no one who kills them, they kill themselves. They have a terrible death.

There is a story about Acharya Buddhajñana. One day while Buddhajñana was teaching to a large gathering of his disciples, his guru, the great yogi Saukarika, a swineherd, passed by the teaching place. Buddhajñana saw his guru but pretended he hadn't and continued teaching. Later, after the teaching was over, Buddhajñana went to see Saukarika. As Buddhajñana was making his prostrations, Saukarika asked him, "Why didn't you prostrate to me earlier?" Buddhajñana replied, "Oh, I didn't see you." Both of his eyes immediately dropped out onto the ground. Saukarika blessed both of Buddhajñana's eyes but was able to restore only one of them.

Acting in ways opposite to correct devotion to the virtuous friend is the root of all failure, from failure to find happiness and success in this life up to failure to achieve enlightenment. One way of making mistakes is not to recognize the mistakes we are making because we haven't checked our behavior in terms of the guru devotion teachings in the lamrim. Another way of making mistakes is simply to be careless. For people who don't know the complete teachings on guru devotion, life becomes the continual creation of heavy negative karma.

- Breaking our samaya with the guru causes our fortune to go lower and lower
- Buddhajñana's eyes dropped out onto the ground because he was untruthful to his guru
- Acting in ways opposite to correct devotion to the virtuous friend is the root of all failure

Guru devotion

3 The disadvantages of incorrect devotion to a guru

3.6 We will be afflicted even in this life by illness and other undesirable things



AFTER WE have established a Dharma connection with a teacher—even if we have received only the oral transmission of a few syllables of a mantra or one verse of a teaching with the recognition of a guru-disciple relationship—there is no doubt that the heaviest negative karma is criticizing or renouncing the guru. One after another, endlessly, we will experience the sufferings of the lower realms. We will wander in the lower realms for an incredible length of time; it will be difficult to see the end of our suffering.

Vajrapani once asked Guru Shakyamuni Buddha, “Bhagavan, what is the ripened aspect result of despising the guru?” Buddha replied, “Don’t ask me that, Vajrapani. If I explained the shortcomings of having made mistakes in devotion to the virtuous friend, all the devas and other worldly beings would be terrified.” He added, “The bodhisattvas, who have great compassion for sentient beings, would vomit blood.” In other words, bodhisattvas, who have so much compassion for sentient beings, wouldn’t be able to stand the shock of hearing about the heavy suffering such a sentient being would have to bear for an unbelievable length of time. The bodhisattvas would find it unendurable, like a mother who knows the son she loves very much is being tortured.

Because this negative karma is so heavy, even if we participate in some enjoyment with a person who has criticized our vajra master from their heart, it takes away our own realizations and causes the experiences we have developed to degenerate. It becomes the root of the pitiful suffering of the lower realms.

- Criticizing or renouncing the guru will cause us to wander endlessly in the lower realms
- The Buddha was unwilling to describe the terrifying results of such karma to Vajrapani
- Even spending time with someone who has criticized the guru brings disastrous results

Guru devotion

- 3 *The disadvantages of incorrect devotion to a guru*
 - 3.7 *In future lives we will wander endlessly in the lower realms*
-



THE FINAL disadvantage of making mistakes in our devotion to the virtuous friend is that in all our future lives we will lack a virtuous friend. Even if the country where we live has thousands of qualified teachers—Tibet or India, for example—we won’t be able to find a guru. We will never meet a virtuous friend, someone to guide us to liberation and enlightenment. Endlessly we will have to wander in samsara and experience suffering.

Karma is expandable, more expandable than, for example, many millions of seeds coming from planting one seed. If we generate negative thoughts toward our virtuous friend or the teachings in this life, these become the cause for the same things to happen for many lifetimes. Even though it takes only a short time to commit the mistake, we will experience the result for a long time, making the same mistake over and over again in many future lifetimes. Even if we are able to take vows, we will break them again; it will be very difficult to keep them purely. If we think of the long-term disadvantages we will be careful in this life to put all our effort into practicing purely.

It is very helpful to know these important points and feel repentance. We should feel great regret about any negative karma we have accumulated in the past by having made mistakes in our devotion to our virtuous friends, as if we had swallowed poison. Because of our strong repentance, the thought not to repeat our mistakes will naturally arise and we will have a strong wish to purify our negative karma.

- If we devote incorrectly we won’t find a guru in future lives and will remain in samsara
- Because karma is expandable, the negative results will continue for many future lifetimes
- By generating strong regret, the thought not to repeat our mistakes will naturally arise

Guru devotion

3 The disadvantages of incorrect devotion to a guru

3.8 In all our future lives we will lack virtuous friends



WE KNOW about these eight benefits and eight shortcomings from our own experience; they describe the failures and successes in our own life. For example, we may try to do retreat, but after some time many disturbances arise and we fail to complete it. Or we may be living in ordination with the great ambition to work for the teachings and sentient beings, but it doesn't turn out that way. The wish is there, but it doesn't happen because there are many obstacles. Even though we may have all the conditions to practice Dharma, many obstacles arise, and we fail.

Such experiences are due to having made mistakes in our practice of guru devotion in past lives or this one. Because we didn't practice guru devotion well in past lives we experience shortcomings in this life and many lifetimes to come, even though we meet the Dharma. Because we have made the same mistakes for many lives in the past, we create the result similar to the cause in this life. Even on those rare occasions when we meet a virtuous teacher and the teachings, we make the same mistakes again in our practice.

However, even if we have made many mistakes, it is very important to make the determination not to make them again. Using every means, especially quotations and strong reasoning, we should meditate again and again on the advantages of devoting to the virtuous friend and the shortcomings of not doing so or of making mistakes in devoting to the virtuous friend. If we do this, the wish to devote to the guru will arise and we will feel great happiness in devoting ourselves to the guru.

- These benefits and shortcomings describe the successes and failures in our own life
- When we don't practice guru devotion well, the same mistakes continue from life to life
- Using quotations and reasoning, we should meditate on these subjects again and again



TRAINING our mind in devotion to the guru means using quotations and logical reasoning to prove to the mind that does not see the guru as a buddha that the guru *is* a buddha. It means training our mind in this meditation. Our ultimate goal is to bring all sentient beings to enlightenment. To succeed in this, we ourselves need to achieve enlightenment first; to do this we need to actualize the path; to do this we need the blessings of the guru. Since the cause of receiving blessings is our devotion, we need to look at the guru as a buddha.

Unless we clearly establish the reasons that we have to practice guru devotion, our guru devotion will be dependent on external factors and not stable or fully established. It can then disappear at any time. Whenever we perceive some mistake in the actions of the guru's holy body, speech or mind, guru devotion that is not well established through reasoning will disappear. If our devotion is established through wisdom, however, even if in our view there appear to be faults in the actions of the guru, we won't believe it is the reality. Because of our stable devotion, any appearance of faults won't affect our mind or cause us to lose our devotion.

Devotion, or faith, is necessary generally for practicing Dharma and particularly for generating the realization of guru devotion. Along with recognizing all sentient beings as our mother, seeing the guru as a buddha is one of the most difficult realizations to generate. Even though it's very difficult, if we don't attempt to realize this, we can't generate the rest of the path to enlightenment.

- We should train our mind in devotion to the guru using quotations and logical reasoning
- Unless our devotion is well established through wisdom it can easily disappear
- Seeing the guru as a buddha is a difficult but essential step on the path to enlightenment

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.1 The root: training our mind in devotion to the guru



IF WE WANT PROFIT AND DON'T WANT LOSS WE HAVE
TO PRACTICE SEEING THE GURU AS A BUDDHA
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

THE FUNDAMENTAL reason that we need to look at our guru as a buddha is connected with the purpose of our life, which is to benefit other sentient beings. Benefiting other sentient beings doesn't mean bringing them just the happiness of this life by giving them money, food, shelter or medicine; it means bringing other sentient beings the happiness of all their coming future lives and the ultimate happiness of liberation from samsara and full enlightenment.

The only way we can achieve all this profit, all this success, is by transforming our mind into the devotion that sees our guru as a buddha. As a disciple, practicing guru devotion is our responsibility. If we have a certain disease and have been told which medicine to take, it is then up to us whether or not we take it. We are free to choose. In other words, we have to use our own wisdom to choose whether or not we practice guru devotion.

If we don't concentrate on guru devotion, we have missed the most important preparation for all our future lives. Our practice of guru devotion is the source of all the progress and all the problems in this life and from life to life. From our practice in this life, we receive all the benefits from life to life, up to enlightenment. This is the source of the greatest loss and the greatest profit. If we don't understand this point well or don't concentrate on it, we experience the greatest loss. Each of us has the answer to achieving success in all our future lives. It is in our hands.

- Seeing the guru as a buddha enables us to fulfil our purpose in life—to benefit all beings
- As a disciple, practicing guru devotion is our responsibility and our choice
- Concentrating on guru devotion is the most important preparation for all our future lives

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.1 The root: training our mind in devotion to the guru

4.1.1 Why we should look at the guru as a buddha



DEVOTION IS the basis of generating all realizations. Pabongka Rinpoche says that even if the instructions we receive are mistaken, if we believe in them, we can still achieve some small common attainments.

The story of the old woman and the dog's tooth supports this. An old Tibetan woman wanted very much to have a relic of the Buddha, so she asked her son to bring one back from India. He forgot, but on his way home he saw a dead dog by the side of the road and pulled out one of its teeth. When he got back he gave it to his mother, telling her it was a Buddha's relic. His mother believed it actually was the holy tooth of Buddha and prayed to it with devotion. By her praying and making offerings to the dog's tooth every day, the Buddha's blessings entered the tooth so that actual Buddha's relics came from it. The dog's tooth was merely the condition; the principal cause of the relics was her devotion. Through her devotion, the old woman got what she wanted.

In a similar way, we can achieve enlightenment through guru yoga practice. Even if the guru is not an enlightened being, if we devote ourselves to the guru as a buddha, we receive the blessings of a buddha through the guru. Even if our virtuous friend is not a bodhisattva but just an ordinary person—or even cruel, impatient or immoral—if we practice guru devotion by looking at that person as a buddha, as in the story of the old woman and the dog's tooth, Buddha's blessings enter the virtuous friend, and we are able to develop our mind. In that way we receive the blessings that enable us to achieve enlightenment.

- Even devotion based on mistaken instructions can bring small attainments
- Due to devotion, the tooth of a dead dog became an actual relic of the Buddha
- In a similar way, we can receive the blessings of the Buddha through the guru

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.1 The root: training our mind in devotion to the guru

The story of the old woman and the dog's tooth



THE BASIC reason that we are able to see the guru as a buddha is that the nature of our mind is such that we can train it in any way we wish. As Shantideva says, there is nothing that the mind cannot be trained to become. In other words, the mind is a causative phenomenon, dependent on causes and conditions. Our mind is like a child: what it becomes depends on how we guide, or direct, it.

It doesn't matter whether or not the guru is an enlightened being. If we look at the guru as a buddha by focusing on their good qualities, we will see them as a buddha; if we look at the guru as an ordinary being with faults, we won't see them as a buddha but as an ordinary being. In other words, we see the guru as a buddha by looking at the guru as a buddha.

Compendium of Valid Cognition, a teaching on logic, explains that with a physical activity such as jumping, we need to apply effort every time we jump; however, the more we train our mind in mental phenomena, such as in generating compassion, the less effort we require to generate compassion. After some time, we can feel compassion effortlessly. It is similar with seeing the guru as a buddha. At first we need to apply effort to generate devotion through using logical reasoning and quotations; then, after some time, our mind will effortlessly be in the nature of devotion. Seeing the guru as a buddha has all to do with mental training; it has all to do with the way we train our mind.

- The key to guru devotion is the fact that we can train our mind in any way we want
- We need to look at the guru as a buddha, not as an ordinary being
- At first we need to apply effort, but gradually our devotion will become effortless

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.1 The root: training our mind in devotion to the guru

4.1.2 Why we are able to see the guru as a buddha



THREE ARE two techniques we can use to enable us to see the guru as a buddha. The first is to train our mind to focus on the good qualities of the guru. Lama Tsongkhapa suggests that we use ourselves as an example. Even though we have many faults, focusing strongly on even one good quality that we have overwhelms any thought of our faults, so that we see ourselves as only good. Our faults become invisible.

When considering the good qualities of our gurus we should think of our own personal experiences of the special qualities of the holy body, speech and mind of each of our gurus and any stories we have heard about them. Think of the particular qualities of that lama that are not common to ordinary people, such as the lama's understanding, loving kindness, humility, patience or ways of guiding sentient beings.

By looking at the guru's good qualities, we train our mind to see the guru as a buddha. Afterwards, we won't find the slightest fault but only good qualities. At that time we will see the guru as a buddha. All the time—whenever we hear our guru's name, see their holy body or remember them—we'll have the thought of them as a buddha, an enlightened being. When this awareness arises effortlessly and spontaneously from the very depths of our heart without needing to rely on quotations or reasoning, we have the realization of guru devotion. All realizations, from the perfect human rebirth up to enlightenment, will then descend like rain falling.

- The first technique for training in devotion is to focus on the good qualities of the guru
- Using our personal experience and stories, we reflect on what is special and uncommon
- With practice, awareness of the guru as a buddha will arise spontaneously in our heart

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.1 The root: training our mind in devotion to the guru

4.1.2 Why we are able to see the guru as a buddha



A KEY ELEMENT OF GURU DEVOTION PRACTICE IS
THE UNDERSTANDING THAT THE GURU SHOWS THE
ASPECT OF HAVING FAULTS WHILE ACTUALLY HAVING
NONE —LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

THE SECOND technique that enables us to see the guru as a buddha is to use any faults we see in the guru to increase our devotion and thus achieve realizations of the path to enlightenment. When we see a fault in our guru we can remember that a buddha manifests various forms and does various activities by seeing that this is exactly what benefits and suits the mind of a particular sentient being. We can then think, “There must be a special reason for this mistake. Perhaps it was purposely done to benefit me or other sentient beings.”

This technique also causes us to remember the special kindness of our gurus, because without depending on these ordinary aspects, no buddhas can guide us to enlightenment. We then appreciate the faults in the human aspect of each of our gurus. During a *Guru Puja* commentary in Dharamsala in 1985, His Holiness the Dalai Lama touched on the most important point in a clear and effective way. His Holiness explained that “manifesting in ordinary aspect” itself means displaying faults. Otherwise, there is no object to label “ordinary aspect.”

If we understand this point, any fault that appears to us in the actions of the guru becomes only a cause to develop the devotion that sees their good qualities. At the time when our seeing faults doesn’t disturb our mind but instead becomes the cause of devotion, the stable root of guru devotion has been established within our heart. This way of thinking is essential to the development of our mind, to guru devotion, and to all other realizations of the path to enlightenment.

- A second technique is to use any faults that we see to increase our guru devotion
- The buddhas manifest to us in an ordinary aspect, which itself means displaying faults
- This way of thinking is essential for developing our mind and achieving realizations

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.1 The root: training our mind in devotion to the guru

4.1.2 Why we are able to see the guru as a buddha

THE GREAT meditator Gen Jampa Wangdu told me the following story about two disciples of a teacher in Tibet, which shows how the way the guru appears depends on the mind training of the disciple.

When the two disciples returned exhausted to their monastery from their home, which was very distant, their teacher greeted them with cold tea. One disciple got angry at his teacher. He thought, “We’ve come such a long way, we’re exhausted, and he hasn’t even bothered to heat the tea up for us.” The other disciple thought, “Our teacher is so kind! He knew we’d be hot and exhausted after coming so far, so he’s purposely kept the tea cold for us.” The disciple who looked at the situation in a negative way had no profit, only loss. He created heavy negative karma by getting angry at and criticizing his guru. The other disciple, who thought that his guru had compassionately kept the tea cold for them, got only profit. This is a simple example of how the way the guru appears depends on how the disciple looks at the guru. It all depends on the disciple’s interpretation.

Looking at the good qualities of the guru and generating devotion becomes the cause of achieving all the realizations of the graduated path to enlightenment. Even if the guru has many faults and few good qualities, ignoring their faults and looking at even one of their good qualities becomes the cause of attainments. And if the guru has many good qualities, looking at the few faults that they have becomes an obstacle to achieving realizations of the path.

- The way the guru appears depends on the mind training of the disciple
- Two disciples interpreted the same action of their guru in completely different ways
- Realizations come when we look at the good qualities of the guru and ignore their faults

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.1 The root: training our mind in devotion to the guru

The story of the two disciples and the cold tea



THREE IS NOTHING to trust in our own view is the most important outline in guru yoga practice; meditating on this topic is like dropping an atomic bomb on our superstitious thoughts that see faults in the guru. It is the most powerful outline for the mind because it stops the arising of wrong conceptions, the hindrances to realizations.

“Nothing is definite in our own view” refers to the fact that it is uncertain whether the way the guru appears to us accords with reality because we have so many wrong concepts, so many layers of hallucination. Our seeing the guru as an ordinary being, which means having faults, doesn’t necessarily mean that in reality our guru is an ordinary being. How we see our gurus depends on how they appear to us, and how they appear to us depends on how we look at them, on our projections. How they appear to us depends on whether we look at them with devotion, as a buddha, or as an ordinary being.

How things appear to us is completely determined by our own level of mind; in accordance with different levels of mind, there are different worlds, different views. We should be aware of this and not think that the view we have is the only way to see an object. The same object can appear in different ways to different people. Awareness of this is very helpful in dealing with problems in our daily life and in controlling our delusions, especially in controlling the thought of faults in guru yoga practice.

- *There is nothing to trust in our own view* is the most important outline in guru yoga practice
- The way we see the guru doesn’t depend on reality, but on our concepts and projections
- How things appear to us is completely determined by our own level of mind

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.1 The root: training our mind in devotion to the guru

4.1.3 How to see the guru as a buddha

4.1.3.1 There is nothing to trust in our view



WE CAN use the stories of present and past great yogis to show how there is nothing to trust in our own view. When sentient beings look at a buddha, even a buddha will appear in many different ways in accord with the level of mind of each individual being. Some will even see an animal, as Asanga did.

After doing retreat in a hermitage for twelve years to try to achieve Maitreya Buddha, Asanga hadn't seen Maitreya Buddha, so he decided to give up the retreat. As he was leaving his hermitage for the final time, Asanga saw a wounded dog in the road. Although it was actually Maitreya Buddha, Asanga saw only a wounded dog, its lower body an open wound filled with maggots. Asanga felt unbearable compassion for the wounded dog and was willing to sacrifice himself to help it. He completely gave up concern for himself and cherished that being. In those moments, he purified the negative karma that for such a long time had blocked his seeing Maitreya Buddha. Because he finished purifying that karma, he no longer saw a dog. That ordinary, impure appearance ceased and he actually saw the holy body of Maitreya Buddha.

Asanga later carried Maitreya Buddha on his shoulders into the nearby town, shouting to all who could hear, "I'm carrying Buddha! Please come to see Buddha!" Most of the people thought he was crazy because they couldn't see anything at all, but there was one old woman who saw him carrying a wounded dog on his shoulders.

- A buddha will appear in different ways according to the level of mind of each being
- Maitreya Buddha appeared to Asanga in the form of a wounded dog infested by maggots
- Most of the local people couldn't even see the dog, let alone Maitreya Buddha

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.1 The root: training our mind in devotion to the guru

4.1.3 How to see the guru as a buddha

The story of Asanga, the dog and the maggots



—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

WHEN I introduce the concept of the buddhas and bodhisattvas working for sentient beings to my students I normally recommend that they first use their own experience of compassion as an example, as this makes it easy to understand. When we feel compassion for someone, we want to help, not harm them. In other words, we try to benefit that person by doing whatever we can for them with our body, speech and mind. Even though we don't feel compassion for every sentient being, we do whatever we can to help those for whom we do feel compassion. If we did feel compassion for all sentient beings, we would try to help all of them according to our capacity. This is logical.

Therefore, there is no doubt that enlightened beings, who have completed the development of compassion for all sentient beings, are working for us, guiding us. We should first make this point clear through the use of quotations and logical reasoning, before considering our gurus. On the basis of certain faith in this, we can then consider our gurus. The subject of guru devotion will then have taste and meaning.

There is no other way that all the buddhas and bodhisattvas are working for sentient beings, including us, except in the forms of the teachers who are directly guiding us by giving us the three levels of vows, oral transmissions, initiations, sutra and tantra commentaries and advice. Every single word of our guru's teaching is guiding us to enlightenment. If our gurus are not those numberless buddhas and bodhisattvas working for us, there is no one else to point out as the ones guiding us to enlightenment. Therefore, our gurus are buddhas.

- Our own experience of compassion can help us understand the activity of the buddhas
- First we develop faith in the compassion of enlightened beings, and then of our gurus
- The only way the buddhas and bodhisattvas can guide us is in the form of our teachers

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.1 The root: training our mind in devotion to the guru

4.1.3 How to see the guru as a buddha

4.1.3.2 All the buddhas and bodhisattvas are still working for sentient beings



DURING OUR beginningless lifetimes until now, all the virtuous teachers we have met—those who gave us ordinations, initiations and teachings—are one being, the absolute guru, who has manifested in various aspects, with different names and forms. When the sun or moon rises, billions of reflections spontaneously arise in all the bodies of water on the earth—in oceans, rivers, ponds and even dew drops. Like this, effortlessly, spontaneously, buddhas work for sentient beings, by revealing the various means that suit them. All our virtuous teachers are the *dharmakaya*, the absolute guru, from where all the buddhas, Dharma and Sangha come.

If the buddhas manifested in purer forms than we now see, we wouldn't have the karma to see them and receive teachings from them. Because our mind is obscured by impure karma, we can't see a buddha's holy body or hear a buddha's holy speech. Therefore, in order to guide us, the buddhas have manifested in the ordinary forms of our virtuous friends, which exactly suit the level of our mind and our karma. In other words, our gurus are the ones who do the activities of all the buddhas, just as ambassadors act on behalf of their country.

Without these gurus in ordinary aspect, there is no way that we can receive the blessings of the buddhas; there is also no way that we can receive the buddhas' actions of teaching and so forth. All the buddhas can guide us only through our gurus. Therefore, even though there are numberless buddhas, without the ordinary forms of our gurus' holy bodies, we would be lost.

- All the virtuous teachers we have met are one being—the absolute guru, the dharmakaya
- Our gurus manifest on behalf of the buddhas just as ambassadors work for their country
- Without these gurus in ordinary aspect we can't receive the blessings of the buddhas

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.1 The root: training our mind in devotion to the guru

4.1.3 How to see the guru as a buddha

4.1.3.3 The guru is the agent of all the buddhas' good works



—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

THREE ARE many quotations from Guru Shakyamuni Buddha and Buddha Vajradhara explaining how, in order to guide sentient beings in the future, they would manifest in the forms of virtuous friends and in various other forms. Such stories and quotations give us more feeling and make it easy for us to generate devotion, the root of the path. They help us to lean more to the side that the guru is a buddha.

Once, on a high mountain in south India where Guru Shakyamuni Buddha was teaching, bodhisattva Amoghadarshi asked Buddha, “At the moment we can receive teachings from the Buddha, but what shall we do in the future when you have passed beyond sorrow? Who will guide us?” Guru Shakyamuni Buddha replied, “Amoghadarshi, in degenerate times in the future, I will manifest in the form of spiritual masters and abbots. In order to ripen the minds of sentient beings, I will also show birth, old age, sickness and death. Don’t worry that you will not meet me in the degenerate times. At that time I shall manifest as the abbot or as the teacher.”

For those who have accumulated great merit, hearing the quotations from Vajradhara and Guru Shakyamuni Buddha will be enough for them; they won’t need any further reasons to prove that the guru is a buddha. For people who develop devotion easily, simply hearing a quotation can be sufficient to convince them, without need of any logical reasoning. However, using logical reasoning to prove a point brings greater and more certain understanding.

- Buddha Vajradhara promised to manifest in forms that included the virtuous friend
- Shakyamuni Buddha also said that he would reappear in the form of spiritual masters
- For people with great merit, hearing these quotations proves that the guru is a buddha

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.1 The root: training our mind in devotion to the guru

4.1.3 How to see the guru as a buddha

4.1.3.4 Vajradhara stated that the guru is a buddha



EVEN IF the sun is shining and we have dry grass or tinder, without a magnifying glass we can't start a fire. When sunbeams hit tinder through a magnifying glass, however, fire comes effortlessly. In a similar way, the blessings of all the buddhas, who are like the sun, come through the guru, who is like a magnifying glass, to the minds of the disciples, who are like the tinder. Even though the fire comes about through the beams of the sun passing through the magnifying glass, the actual function of producing fire comes from the magnifying glass. Like a magnifying glass, the guru burns the delusions in the disciple's mind.

Another effective way to meditate is to think of the guru as being like a rope and ourselves as having fallen into a deep pit of fire. Being in samsara is like being in a fire. If we fall into a fiery pit, people standing at the top can't rescue us without a rope. Similarly, without the guru, all the buddhas of the three times and ten directions can't guide us to enlightenment.

If we hold onto our gurus, if we correctly devote ourselves to our gurus, there is no doubt that we can be saved from the sufferings of samsara, particularly those of the three lower realms, and also from the lower nirvana. Not devoting ourselves correctly to our gurus is like ignoring the rope that is sent down to us. If we don't grab hold of the rope, we can't be saved.

- The guru is like a magnifying glass that creates fire from the rays of the sun
- Just as a rope can rescue us from a fiery pit, the guru can rescue us from samsara
- If we practice correct devotion there is no doubt we will be saved from suffering

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.1 The root: training our mind in devotion to the guru



FROM THE practical point of view, when the teacher gives us some kind of knowledge, some kind of instruction that we can check out, something so truthful, something that touches our heart, and this initiative somehow puts us into the right direction, we feel their great kindness in touching our mind in such a way and putting it in the right direction. Actually, almost no one in the world can do that, I tell you. I am talking about my own experience.

For me, guru devotion is like a kind of energy. If somebody gives us a good present, we say, “Thank you so much, thank you.” We thank them, don’t we? Again, we use the relative mind. “They are very kind. They gave me this.” Similarly, when someone is opening our heart, there is some kind of natural gratitude. If somebody gives us happiness, naturally there is some gratitude. And if somebody is also concerned about our life and our happiness, that makes us think, “Somebody is concerned about my life and me, and for that I am very grateful.” I think that is very reasonable, isn’t it?

If somebody is really concerned about our life and wants to lead us to perfect happiness, I think that is an incredible thing. Normally, my worldly father and my mama, of course they are concerned. In Eastern culture, good papas and mamas are concerned that we are healthy and happy. But somehow, some of our teachers are concerned in a tremendous way and are so interested in making us happy. I think that is incredible; it makes my heart shake.

- When the guru’s instructions touch our heart, we feel their great kindness
- If someone brings us happiness, it is natural to feel grateful
- How incredible that our teachers have such tremendous care and concern for us

*Guru devotion**4 Devoting ourselves through thought**4.2 Developing respect by remembering the guru’s kindness*



THREE ARE two ways to think about how the guru is kinder and more precious than the buddhas. One is to think that our present virtuous teacher, who appears in an ordinary aspect, is a manifestation of the absolute guru and everything—including Buddha, Dharma and Sangha—comes from the absolute guru.

Our gurus are the absolute guru, the dharmakaya; therefore, our present gurus are all the gurus from our beginningless past lives who have guided us to the point of our present perfect human body and they are the same ones who, in our future lives, will guide us to enlightenment. Each of our gurus has been kind to us during beginningless samsaric lifetimes, is kind to us in this life and will also be kind to us in the future, until we achieve enlightenment. Recognizing our guru's past, present and future kindness deepens our appreciation of their kindness.

Here it helps to understand the meaning of “unified primordial savior,” an expression found in one of the requesting verses in *Guru Puja*. It describes the all-pervasive Vajradhara. If we keep in mind the real meaning of guru, we can see all our past-life gurus as just one. All our gurus—those who gave us vows and teachings in all our past lives, the gurus we have now and those we will have in the future—are just one being: the unified primordial savior, the primordial dharmakaya. All our past, present and future gurus are just one, and they guide us through the conventional guru, who appears in accordance with our karma. This is the aspect we can see and receive direct guidance from.

- As a manifestation of the absolute guru our present guru is kinder than all the buddhas
- Recognizing our guru's past, present and future kindness will deepen our appreciation
- We are guided by the conventional guru, who is the unified primordial savior

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.2 Developing respect by remembering the guru's kindness

4.2.1 The guru is kinder than all the buddhas

4.2.1.1 The guru is kinder than all the buddhas in general



A SECOND WAY to think about how the guru is kinder and more precious than the buddhas is to think that the numberless buddhas can't guide us in the aspect of buddhas because we don't have the karma to see them; only our present gurus can guide us. Without them we'd be without a guide, like a child without parents. We would be like a crawling baby who doesn't know anything, not even what to eat.

There have been numberless buddhas in countless universes, but we haven't been subdued by any of them. During our beginningless past lives, we didn't have the fortune to receive teachings directly from those buddhas and become enlightened. Numberless other sentient beings who were wandering in samsara with us have become enlightened, but we still haven't achieved any realizations. Like this, we are pitiful. We are like the student who has been kicked out of school because they are impossible to help.

Numberless other sentient beings have become enlightened during our beginningless rebirths, but we have been left out, which shows very clearly how selfish and unsubdued our mind has been. Even though our mind is like this and we are so pitiful, our guru has shown us the complete and unmistaken path to the happiness of future lives, liberation and enlightenment. Even if each guru hasn't personally revealed the whole path, all our gurus together have shown us the complete path. Therefore they are unbelievably kind, and without wasting this opportunity, we must practice this path, on the basis of correctly devoting ourselves to our virtuous friends.

- Since only our guru can guide us, they are kinder and more precious than all the buddhas
- Numberless buddhas in countless universes have failed to subdue us in the past
- Even though we are so pitiful, our guru has shown us the complete and unmistaken path

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.2 Developing respect by remembering the guru's kindness

4.2.1 The guru is kinder than all the buddhas

4.2.1.1 The guru is kinder than all the buddhas in general



GURU SHAKYAMUNI BUDDHA taught Dharma in Rajgir and many other places but we didn't have the fortune to be his direct disciples and hear teachings directly from Buddha, achieve realizations of the path and become enlightened along with his other disciples. We were left out; we didn't have the karma to be subdued by Guru Shakyamuni Buddha. Now, when the Buddha's teaching is setting like the sun and everything is about to become dark in this world, our gurus are guiding us by revealing the Dharma.

Like a discarded bone, we have been cast aside by Guru Shakyamuni Buddha, all the Indian pandits and all the great Tibetan yogis. However, since our present gurus are guiding us, they are much kinder than all those other holy beings. If we hadn't met our present gurus we would be completely ignorant. We would be called a human being simply because we have the external form of a human. If we hadn't met our present gurus we would have had no opportunity at all to practice Mahayana Dharma, to create the cause of temporary and ultimate happiness and to abandon the cause of suffering. We would have had no opportunity to make preparation for the happiness of future lives, liberation and enlightenment.

If our present gurus weren't guiding us, what would happen to us? We would be completely lost. There would be nobody to guide us on the path to the happiness of future lives and especially to liberation and full enlightenment. Therefore, our gurus are extremely kind, kinder than all the buddhas before Guru Shakyamuni Buddha and kinder than even Guru Shakyamuni Buddha.

- We didn't have the karma to hear teachings directly from Guru Shakyamuni Buddha
- If we hadn't met our present gurus we would be completely ignorant
- The kindness of the gurus who guide us exceeds even that of Guru Shakyamuni Buddha

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.2 Developing respect by remembering the guru's kindness

4.2.1 The guru is kinder than all the buddhas

4.2.1.2 The guru is kinder than Shakyamuni Buddha in particular



WE SHOULD COMPARE THE KINDNESS OF OUR GURU
 IN TEACHING US DHARMA TO THE KINDNESS OF A
 DOCTOR OR HEALER WHO CURES US OF CANCER
 —LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

IF WE had cancer and were afraid of dying, we would find the situation unbearable. Day and night we would look for help. If we found a doctor who could cure our cancer we would regard that person as very kind and precious, and consider the rest of our life to be a gift from them. Yet the kindness of a doctor who cures our cancer is nothing compared to the kindness of our guru. Even if our guru gives us just the oral transmission of one mantra or one verse of teaching, the benefit we receive is as limitless as space. If we do nothing about the actual cause of our cancer—delusion and negative karma—our recovery from cancer will only be temporary. We can't purify delusion and karma simply by taking medicine or having an operation.

Our present gurus are unbelievably kind because they are leading us to full enlightenment by revealing the unmistaken Mahayana teachings. Think of how all their actions of giving vows, oral transmissions, initiations, teachings and personal advice are guiding us to enlightenment.

First, we can think of their kindness in revealing the Buddhadharma, especially Mahayana Dharma, which enables us to achieve not only a good rebirth in our next life and liberation from the whole of samsara, but full enlightenment. Then, if we have received tantric teachings, we can meditate on the kindness of the guru who, by revealing tantra, grants us enlightenment quickly, within just a few years or even in one short life. Think how unbelievably kind to us the guru is; there's no greater kindness than this.

- Our guru is infinitely kinder and more beneficial than the doctor who cures us of cancer
- Every action of our guru reveals the Mahayana teachings and leads us to enlightenment
- The guru's kindness in sharing the Buddhadharma is unbelievable and incomparable

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.2 Developing respect by remembering the guru's kindness

4.2.2 The guru's kindness in teaching Dharma



HAVING EXPERIENCES or realizations of the path to enlightenment depends on receiving the blessings of the guru within our own mental continuum. The clear, strong feeling in our heart and deep benefit to our mind are what is meant by the blessings of the guru. Without a guru, we can't achieve realizations. This is why it's not sufficient to have just intellectual knowledge, like that gained from studying with professors in a university.

The guru's blessings transform our mind from being hard and unsubdued into being soft and subdued. Even from our own experiences, we can tell that what the teachings say about the blessings of the guru is true and have complete faith in it. When we have strong guru devotion in our heart, if we meditate on the perfect human rebirth, we feel its preciousness very easily; if we meditate on impermanence and death, we feel the transitory nature of life very strongly and easily; and the same thing happens if we meditate on compassion, emptiness or any other lamrim topic. In a state of strong devotion, our mind is also calmer, more subdued. Our delusions arise only with difficulty and are easy to control.

Just as rain moistens the ground so that seeds planted in a field can grow, the rain of the guru's blessings moistens the field of our mind so that realizations can grow. If we have no devotion, we have no cause to receive the blessings of the guru, and without blessings we have no cause for realizations of the path to enlightenment. This means that we can't achieve enlightenment and accomplish the ultimate goal of our life.

- All our experiences and realizations on the path depend on the guru blessing our mind
- The guru's blessings transform our mind into being soft and subdued
- Blessings lead to realizations and enlightenment just as rain enables a seed to grow

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.2 Developing respect by remembering the guru's kindness

4.2.3 The guru's kindness in blessing our mindstream



ANOTHER KINDNESS of the guru is in making us happy and inspiring us to practice Dharma through gifts of food, clothing and other material things. Because we like material things more than Dharma, the guru is able to guide us into the Dharma by providing us with material enjoyments; in this way we continue to follow the guru and to practice Dharma.

Sometimes we may generate negative thoughts toward the guru because we have experienced suffering in fulfilling their demands and they haven't even bothered to express their gratitude or compliment us. At such times we could have a negative view of our lama, seeing them as heartless and filled with nothing but self-cherishing. By fulfilling our temporal needs, the lama can transform the situation; the lama can make us happy, cause us to generate devotion and stop us from creating negative karma. Also, when we don't care much about practicing Dharma, by fulfilling our temporal needs, our guru can inspire us to transform our mind and follow their advice. When the guru gives material gifts to those no longer interested in practicing Dharma, we can be inspired to practice. When we are tired from listening to teachings, for example, after our guru gives us a cup of coffee, we are able to listen to more.

We can relate to the kindness of the guru in a general and extensive way and then meditate on specific examples of the kindness of each of our gurus. We should remember the kindness of our gurus from our heart.

- A further kindness of the guru is to inspire us to practice Dharma through material gifts
- By fulfilling our temporal needs the lama makes us happy and strengthens our devotion
- We can remember the guru's kindness in general and then meditate on specific examples

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.2 Developing respect by remembering the guru's kindness

4.2.4 The guru's kindness in inspiring us to practice Dharma through material gifts



WE ARE going around and around and are so lost. We don't know what we want to do and don't know what we want to understand. We are lost. Since countless lives we are lost but still we think we are not lost. "I know exactly what I want because I want chocolate." The fact is that we are lost. But we are not going to admit it. To be lost is pretty sad.

When we come to understand this we will feel some relief and gain some kind of respect for the kindness of the guru: "By your kindness, I, who am such a worthless beginner, can by your incredible method and wisdom reach the highest state. Through your great skillful wisdom and method I can attain the enlightened realizations comparatively in the time it takes to snap my fingers. The awakened state, the realization of enlightenment, the great blissful siddhis can be attained in a moment by your great skillful wisdom. You are the most precious phenomenon. I prostrate to your vajra feet. You, the guru, are the most precious thing in all existence."

Guru devotion is not something we practice because Buddhists do it and because the guru says so. This is not enough. Guru devotion comes from having had a helpful experience, from better understanding, from finding some kind of solution. Then it is logical to have guru devotion. When we decide this is the right path and the right direction for me, devotion to the guru will naturally arise.

- Even if we don't want to admit it, we have been lost and confused for countless lives
- Realizing this brings us some relief and we gain respect for the kindness of the guru
- Genuine guru devotion comes from having helpful experiences and finding solutions

Guru devotion

4 Devoting ourselves through thought

4.2 Developing respect by remembering the guru's kindness



WITH GURU devotion, seeing the guru as a buddha, we are able to devote ourselves correctly to the virtuous friend with thought, and then naturally we devote ourselves correctly with action. We are able to follow the guru's advice easily and joyfully, practicing the teachings according to our guru's instructions, which is the best way to devote to the virtuous friend with action. Correct devotion to the guru with action comes easily as a result of correct devotion with thought. How well we are able to devote ourselves to the guru with action is determined by how well we devote ourselves with thought.

Once we have meditated on the eight benefits of correct devotion to the guru, trained our mind in the devotion that sees the guru as a buddha and generated respect by remembering the guru's kindness, each piece of advice given to us by our guru is like a wish-fulfilling gem, because each time we follow our guru's advice we purify inconceivable negative karma and obscurations and come closer to enlightenment. Everything—all the happiness not only of this life but of future lives, liberation and enlightenment—comes from following each instruction.

If we have strong faith, or devotion, we are the luckiest people alive, because we're able to abide by our guru's advice twenty-four hours a day. No matter what difficult situation arises, because of our devotion we experience no hardship. We happily and easily abide by our guru's advice, whether it is to do Dharma practice or offer service. No matter what difficulties we encounter, with the devotion that sees the guru as a buddha, we feel incredible joy twenty-four hours a day.

- Correct devotion to the guru with thought leads to correct devotion with action
- Each time we follow our guru's advice it brings purification and progress on the path
- People with strong devotion feel incredible joy no matter what difficulties they face

Guru devotion

5. Devoting ourselves through action

5.1 Carrying out the guru's advice

MANY PEOPLE think that to serve the guru we have to be with the guru. This is not so. It doesn't matter whether we're living in the guru's house or on the other side of the world. We could be on the moon or the sun and still be serving the guru by keeping purely the vows we have been given: refuge vows, pratimoksha vows, like the five lay vows or the eight Mahayana precepts, and higher vows, such as those of monastic ordination or the bodhisattva or tantric vows. If we are keeping those vows we are following the guru's advice, fulfilling their wishes; we are serving the guru.

Also, meditating, studying such things as the lamrim, the commentaries and the philosophical teachings—learning the Dharma and integrating it into our practice—is what the guru wishes us to do, and doing all that is also serving the guru, fulfilling their advice. Doing whatever else the guru has advised us to do, such as going into retreat or teaching Dharma, is also service to the guru. In general, anything that benefits sentient beings and helps liberate them from suffering is service to the guru because that is exactly what they advise us to do.

Making prostrations to the past, present and future buddhas for ten million, six hundred thousand eons cannot compare to being expert in serving the guru; being fortunate and wise enough to do so is far more meaningful. If we can accomplish whatever the guru advises us to do, all our wishes, our desires, will succeed just like that, and we will collect unimaginable merit.

- Wherever we are, we can serve the guru by keeping our vows and fulfilling their wishes
- Service to the guru includes following their advice and benefiting other beings
- Being expert and wise in serving the guru brings unimaginable merit and every success

*Guru devotion**5. Devoting ourselves through action**5.2 Offering respect and service*



WHEN WE offer even a glass of water to our guru, we should make the offering by thinking that the guru is all the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions. Since making an offering to even a pore of the guru creates more merit than making offerings to all the buddhas of the three times, there is no doubt about the benefit of making offerings to the actual guru. Even though there is already this benefit, our practice will be more effective if we meditate that the guru is all the buddhas and bodhisattvas when we serve the guru, because it will help us to constantly keep guru devotion in mind and stop negative thoughts toward the guru.

Whether or not we physically hear or see that the guru is pleased, the guru is someone who is pleased by our practice, not by receiving material offerings. This is how it should be. However, if we see our virtuous friend made happy by receiving material offerings, it's a mistake to think that this is wrong. That is incorrect devotion to the virtuous friend. High lamas will often show the aspect of being pleased when receiving material offerings just to make the disciple happy.

We become closer to enlightenment each time we follow our guru's advice, make offerings or offer service to them because we thus perform the most powerful purification and collect the most extensive merit. In this way our level of mind continuously gets higher and higher and we get closer and closer to enlightenment.

- We should offer to the guru thinking of them as all the holy beings of the ten directions
- The guru is someone who is pleased by our practice, not by receiving material offerings
- Making offerings to the guru brings powerful purification and collects extensive merit

Guru devotion

5. Devoting ourselves through action

5.3 Making material offerings



IN THE practice of guru devotion according to the Mahayana sutra, there is no instruction to stop the ordinary appearance of the guru and there is no mention of visualizing the guru as the deity. This is mentioned only in the guru yoga practice of tantra.

The teachings of Mahayana sutra mention that we use quotations and logical reasoning, supported by our own particular experiences (if we have any), to see the essence of the guru as buddha. And we see the holy mind of the guru as the dharmakaya. By looking at the guru as buddha, we then see the guru as buddha, as pure, even though their appearance is ordinary. When by looking at the guru as buddha, we see the guru as buddha, the appearance of the guru doesn't change. This is the main point.

In tantra, on top of that, even the external appearance is pure. Tantric guru yoga practice is done on the basis of the sutra practice. First, we use logical reasoning and personal experiences to prove to our mind, which sees the guru as ordinary, that the guru in essence is buddha. This is the foundation. On this basis we then see the guru in the aspect of the deity by looking at the guru in the deity's aspect. This is the foundation when we do *Lama Chöpa*, six-session yoga or any other guru yoga practice in which we generate the deity. We have to establish the mind of guru devotion in place of the mind that projects ordinary appearances and concepts of the guru, especially in relation to the mind of the guru.

- Visualizing the guru as the deity is a tantric guru yoga practice not found in the sutras
- The teachings of Mahayana sutra use logic to show how the guru in essence is a buddha
- In tantra, not only the essence but also the external appearance of the guru is seen as pure



BY PRACTICING guru yoga, by seeing the totally positive qualities of the guru, we can let our negative perceptions go. Most of the time our human mind thinks, “I’m a human being; I’m like this. They are also a human being; therefore, they must be like me.” This is a misconception. By practicing guru yoga, we learn to understand that in reality, the guru is inseparable from the compassion and wisdom of the deity. And then we start to see the inseparability of these qualities and ourselves.

Another way of saying this is that guru yoga practice gives us the inspiration to develop our own human potential. When we see someone with such positive energy, such compassion and wisdom, we are powerfully affected; we want to be like that, too. We have the same potential; we just need to activate it. It’s like when our friend buys a beautiful new car. When we see what a good time they are having, we are energized to get one as well. We can understand this, can’t we? It’s a good example.

So definitely, when we encounter such powerful, good qualities as great compassion and wisdom and see the possibility of having an everlasting good time, we will definitely think, “Why not that, rather than confusion?” And not just for ourselves, but to help all universal living beings. We talk about unity, oneness, equality, impartiality, but we have to know how to achieve these qualities. How? Through guru yoga, that is the method.

- In guru yoga, the guru is inseparable from the compassion and wisdom of the deity
- Seeing someone with such positive qualities inspires us to develop our own potential
- Through guru yoga we can achieve these qualities not just for ourselves but for all beings



A COMMON PROBLEM for all of us is that our knowledge of so-called spiritual matters is often just in our head, not in our heart. We are proud of how much we have studied and learned about the world's religions and may even have mastered the vocabulary of their philosophy and meditational practices, yet we remain basically unsubdued and deluded.

What is lacking is the proper inspiration, or blessing, in our mind. We have to be convinced by some kind of heartfelt, living experience of the existence and effectiveness of a potent spiritual reality both inside and outside ourselves. Otherwise our wisdom-eye remains closed and we are incapable of perceiving this profound reality no matter how much we might have studied.

It is the guru who provides this necessary inspiration, this link between our consciousness and the actual experience of transcendence. In the behavior of our own guru we can see for ourselves the beneficial effects of training the mind in love and wisdom. By thinking of our guru's lifetime devotion to others and their lack of self-cherishing, as well as the many other excellent qualities our guru embodies, and then by dissolving and absorbing the entire lineage of gurus into our heart, we are enabling these enlightened qualities to take root deep within us. It has been the experience of generations of gurus and disciples that the repeated practice of such visualizations, done in conjunction with the letting go of our concrete conceptions of self, has a profound effect on the mind and can transform dry, intellectual knowledge into an organic experience of insight.

- Our knowledge of so-called spiritual matters is often in our head, not our heart
- We need the blessing of a heartfelt living experience that opens our wisdom-eye
- The guru is the link between our consciousness and the experience of transcendence



THE TANTRIC texts often mention that all realizations come from the guru. This is true, but we have to understand that “guru” has two different levels of meaning. The relative, objective guru is the teacher who, by communicating with us in different ways, shows us how to act so that we can discover our own totality. But on a deeper, more subjective level, our guru is none other than our own inner wisdom, our own fundamental clarity of mind.

Practically speaking, there is only so much the relative, external guru can do for us; they cannot guarantee that we gain insight and realizations. But our inner guru, our own clear wisdom, can accomplish everything. The practice of guru yoga, therefore, is primarily a method for learning how to listen to this inner guru.

Ordinarily, even though we do possess this inner voice of wisdom, we do not listen to it. We do not even hear it! We are too busy listening to the garbage conversation of our gross dualistic minds. We are so accustomed to this that even when wisdom does arise, as an intuitive insight, we often reject it. By practicing guru yoga we are able progressively to cut through our superficial ways of relating to the world and make contact with the innate wisdom at the heart of our being. When we have done this, then we can communicate deeply with the outer guru as well. But as long as we are out of touch with our inner guru, no matter how profound the teachings of the outer guru may be, we will never be able to integrate them.

- “Guru” has two meanings: the external, relative teacher and our own inner wisdom
- Guru yoga practice is primarily a method for learning how to listen to our inner guru
- Practicing guru yoga connects us with the innate wisdom at the heart of our being



IN GURU YOGA, the essential point to understand is that all the buddhas are of one taste in the dharmakaya. The dharmakaya is the absolute guru, and this is all the buddhas. This is the very heart of guru yoga practice. Without understanding this, there's no way to practice guru yoga comfortably. Even if we do the visualizations it won't be completely satisfactory because we'll be unclear as to how a buddha is the embodiment of the guru and the guru is the embodiment of a buddha. However, it will be extremely clear if we understand the very heart of guru yoga, that the guru is a buddha and a buddha is the guru.

The dharmakaya is like the ocean in which many waters are mixed and our various gurus are like drops from the ocean. All our gurus are manifestations of the dharmakaya, the absolute guru, the holy mind of all the buddhas; the absolute guru manifests in an ordinary form in accordance with our karma. This ordinary form is the conventional guru, the essence of which is the absolute guru. When we actually see or visualize a deity or see statues or paintings of deities we should recognize that they are all the guru.

Now, with this recognition of what the guru is, with this understanding of the absolute guru, it is easy to relate to all the buddhas of the ten directions. No matter how many different external aspects there are—male, female, two arms or a thousand—they are all manifestations of the guru, and the guru is all those buddhas.

- The essential point in guru yoga is that all buddhas are of one taste in the dharmakaya
- The absolute guru appears in ordinary form according to the level of our karma
- All buddhas and deities are manifestations of the guru, and the guru is all those buddhas



BECAUSE GURU DEVOTION is the most difficult realization to achieve, we need to put a lot of effort into it. Just doing the meditations a few times can't transform our mind into the realization of seeing the guru as a buddha. We won't feel this after doing the meditations for just a few months—or even a few years. Since we can't easily stop the faults of our mind and generate this devotional thought, we need to apply great effort.

From the very beginning of our guru devotion practice we should do much analytical meditation as explained in the sutra and tantra teachings. We shouldn't be satisfied by thinking about a few of the points just once or twice. We must reflect on the points over and over again, using quotations and reasoning, until we generate the realization. If our guru devotion is well established through logical reasoning and analytical meditation, we'll be able to transform our mind into the devotion that sees the guru as a buddha.

We then stabilize our devotion by doing fixed, or single-pointed, meditation on our feeling that the guru is a buddha. In this way, we preserve that experience of devotion. We train again and again with analytical and then fixed meditation. After we have transformed our mind into the devotion that sees the guru as a buddha, we keep our mind in that state of devotion for as long as possible. If possible, we should do guru devotion meditation every morning when we meditate on lamrim, then try to continue the experience during the rest of the day. This is the best way to ensure quick and stable development of the guru devotion realization.

- Guru devotion is the most difficult realization to achieve, so it demands great effort
- Using quotations and reasoning, we must reflect on the points again and again
- Once the mind is transformed into devotion, stabilize it through fixed meditation

Guru devotion

Wrap-up

THE ACTUAL proof of how experiences and realizations of the path to enlightenment depend on the root of strong guru devotion comes when we practice. We can clearly see the difference in our everyday life between times when we're correctly devoting ourselves to the guru with thought and action and times when we're not.

When our guru devotion is strong our experience of whatever we are meditating on—impermanence and death, renunciation of samsara, bodhicitta, emptiness and so forth—is strong. We find it very easy to feel the meditations. Because we are continuously receiving blessings, any meditation we do is effective and any prayer we do moves our mind and brings understanding. Even though we might have been saying the same prayer for many years, each word now affects us because we discover its meaning. This is a sign that our mind has been ripened through strong practice of purification and accumulation of merit in dependence upon the holy object of the guru.

With strong devotion, we also have complete trust in our guru and no difficulty in following whatever advice we are given; we find it very easy and enjoyable to follow it. When our mind is filled with devotion we also experience great inner peace. Our heart is full of incredible joy and we see ourselves as unbelievably fortunate. Even though there might be other difficulties in our life, such as no money, no visa or no job, our strong guru devotion overwhelms our problems and external things don't bother us much. Our life becomes very enjoyable and very meaningful.

- We can see for ourselves the importance of correctly devoting to the guru
- When our guru devotion is strong, our meditation is more powerful and effective
- A mind filled with devotion brings inner peace and an enjoyable and meaningful life

Guru devotion

Wrap-up



THE GREAT meditator, Lama Tsongkhapa, who formalized the whole lamrim structure, broke the lamrim up into two: appreciation of this life of freedom and richness—the perfect human rebirth—and how to make use of this precious opportunity—the rest of the lamrim topics from impermanence and death, refuge and karma up to the point where we attain full enlightenment.

The lamrim is not like a buffet, where we can pick and choose whatever we fancy. We have to eat the whole feast, otherwise we won't get what we want, liberation or enlightenment. When we explore the lamrim we will see how each topic leads to the next and how each is therefore indispensable. The meditations on the perfect human rebirth come right at the beginning of the path, just after relying on a spiritual teacher. We need to understand karma and we need to have refuge, and to deepen our commitment we need to understand impermanence and death. But none of that will happen if we squander this precious and unique opportunity that we now have, this one time only.

Only those of us with this perfect human rebirth can become inner scientists and discover the true cause of happiness. We're unbelievably fortunate. We have the opportunity to study, meditate and understand everything that the Buddha taught, from the simplest lamrim topic to the most advanced. We have the opportunity to develop the altruistic heart, the attitude that wishes to be fully awakened to benefit others, and to understand the reality of things and events—emptiness. There is nothing we cannot understand with this perfect human rebirth.

- The first section of the lamrim focuses on the perfect human rebirth
- Each lamrim topic is an essential step on the journey to enlightenment
- Only a perfect human rebirth gives us the opportunity to discover true happiness

The perfect human rebirth



LAMA TSONGKHAPA and Pabongka Rinpoche divide the topic of the perfect human rebirth into three sections: identifying the perfect human rebirth, understanding its benefits and understanding the difficulty of obtaining it. The first part shows exactly what we have that is so precious: eight freedoms—states of existence from which we are free—and ten richnesses—qualities that we have that make this situation so special. Only when we have all eighteen of these extraordinary conditions can we say we have a perfect human rebirth. Only then can we take full advantage of what we have and develop our mind to its ultimate potential.

A good way to meditate on the perfect human rebirth is to go over each of the eight freedoms and ten richnesses individually, reflecting on each one in depth, trying to see just why we are so fortunate to have these eighteen qualities. But we shouldn't meditate on each of the freedoms and richnesses as if we were an observer. We must really put ourselves into the situation as if that were us, and feel what it would be like. Then we can really get an appreciation of the actual situation we're in at the moment.

In some ways, meditating on the eight freedoms and ten richnesses also becomes a meditation on compassion, because we have to think about the problems experienced by other sentient beings who do not have the opportunity to practice the holy Dharma. We are free and they are trapped. The only conclusion we can draw from this is that we must do everything in our power to help them as much as we possibly can. From that determination, the precious jewel of bodhicitta arises.

- The first section of this topic describes the extraordinary conditions we have
- We should reflect deeply on each of the eight freedoms and ten richnesses
- In this way we naturally develop compassion for beings who lack these opportunities



OF THE eight freedoms, the first is having the chance to practice Dharma through not having been born in the hell realms. For the hell being, the suffering is so intense that pain and suffering are what defines its existence. There is no space in that being's mind for anything other than the unbearable suffering that it has to endure for what seems like an infinitely long time without the slightest respite and without any understanding that it will eventually end.

Imagine if somebody were to throw us into a tub of boiling water and hold us there. We wouldn't be able to meditate on emptiness, we wouldn't be able to generate compassion—in fact, all we would be able to do would be to struggle to be free from the unendurable pain. Getting free would be all that we could think of. The suffering a hell being has to endure is billions of times worse than this. Therefore, this first freedom is the freedom from that terrible suffering, which means the freedom to practice Dharma and develop positive qualities such as compassion and wisdom.

If we don't contemplate the suffering of the lower realms we won't be able to see what a miracle this perfect human rebirth is and will be very likely to squander it. Perhaps we can see that practicing Dharma is worthwhile and that we might become a better person if we do it, but somehow, without the impetus of understanding life in the lower realms, we will never have the energy to really take on the essence of the Dharma. That is why it is so important to try to fully understand what each freedom means.

- A hell being's mind has no space for anything except unbearable suffering
- It's impossible to develop positive qualities when experiencing terrible pain
- By contemplating such suffering we generate the energy to really practice Dharma

The perfect human rebirth

1 Identifying the perfect human rebirth

1.1 The freedom of not being born as a hell being



THE SECOND freedom is not having been born as a hungry ghost, whose main sufferings are hunger and thirst, caused by miserliness and desire, although they also have many other forms of suffering. Most of us have probably never been truly starving in our life. Can we remember a time when for some reason we weren't able to eat for two or three days? Unless we were very sick, the feeling of hunger would have been very unpleasant. Now think what it would be like if we had to go without food for a week. The pain in our stomach would be terrible—it would be almost impossible to think of anything else and certainly impossible to meditate with so much hunger.

Any feeling of hunger we could possibly have is nothing compared to what hungry ghosts have to suffer every moment of their lives. For hundreds and hundreds of years they wander, searching for a scrap of food or a drop of water, unable to find anything. It's impossible to imagine the desperation that must totally overwhelm their lives.

We should take time to really reflect on the suffering of the hungry ghosts and the causes of that suffering—attachment and miserliness—and determine to never create such causes again. We should think, “If I were born now as a suffering hungry ghost, it would be impossible to practice the holy Dharma. How fortunate I am to have the freedom to practice Dharma through not having been born in the hungry ghost realm. With this freedom, within these twenty-four hours, within this hour, even within this minute, I have the incredible freedom to obtain whichever of the three great purposes I want.”

- The suffering of hunger and thirst makes it near impossible to think of anything else
- The lives of hungry ghosts are totally overwhelmed by desperation
- If we were reborn as a hungry ghost we would have no freedom to practice Dharma

The perfect human rebirth

1 Identifying the perfect human rebirth

1.2 The freedom of not being born as a hungry ghost



IT IS EXTREMELY DIFFICULT FOR ANIMALS TO CREATE
ANY MERIT, NO MATTER HOW LONG THEY LIVE
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

THE THIRD freedom is not having been born as an animal, whose main suffering is being dumb and foolish, with a mind incapable of understanding anything other than survival, although there are many other sufferings besides. The main cause of being born in the animal realm, ignorance, traps them in a life without choice. Those who must kill to survive do so without choice; their victims are powerless not to be killed by them. If we were to suddenly find ourselves in the body of an animal, we'd be terrified.

But in fact, this is what we could be by this time tomorrow. We simply do not know when we will die or what our next rebirth will be. We could soon be living in a glass tank full of water in a restaurant, a tasty lobster or a fat fish, waiting for a customer to choose us for their meal. We could soon be a fish struggling on the end of a line with a hook in our mouth or a worm being eaten alive by thousands of ants. We just don't know. If we *did* know, we would then really value this most precious of things, the human life.

Thinking of the suffering of animals, we can start to appreciate how there is no escape as long as we are in samsara. It really is unbearable and terrifying and we need to do whatever we can to be free from it. Only the practice of virtue can free us. This is something no animal can understand. But we are not an animal; we are human and we have the capacity to understand this. This is an amazing freedom.

- Animals are dumb and foolish, trapped by ignorance in a life without choice
- We need to realize that by this time tomorrow we could be a lobster, fish or worm
- Reflecting on the suffering of animals enables us to appreciate our own freedom

The perfect human rebirth

1 Identifying the perfect human rebirth

1.3 The freedom of not being born as an animal



THE GODS ARE SO OVERWHELMED BY PLEASURE
 THAT THEY HAVE NO WAY OF KNOWING THE NATURE
 OF SUFFERING AND NO WAY TO PRACTICE DHARMA
 —LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

IT IS easy to see that as a hell being, hungry ghost or animal it is almost impossible to create any virtuous action. But also as a long-life god—either in the desire realm distracted by pleasure or in the form or formless realm absorbed in concentration—it is extremely difficult to see the nature of suffering and therefore extremely difficult to practice Dharma. Unless we see its faults, how can we renounce samsara?

The world of the desire realm gods is free from the problems that we experience—having to work to feed ourselves, having to expend energy to be comfortable and happy. Every pleasure comes to them effortlessly. With all this luxury, their minds are constantly distracted by sense pleasures and they have no thoughts other than what to experience next. We can see this a little bit in our own life, where we can easily be distracted from meditation by thoughts of the new car or computer we want to buy or the movie or restaurant we're going to that night. The main problem, of course, is attachment. Material possessions bring with them attachment, and with attachment comes the mind that always wanders to the object of attachment. This becomes a huge distraction when we try to practice Dharma.

Contemplating the suffering of the gods, even with their unbelievable pleasures, helps us appreciate how precious this human life is. Only with this perfect human rebirth can we practice the Dharma—no god can, no animal can, no hungry ghost can and certainly no hell being can. We should feel this deeply in our heart and determine never to waste even a second of this life.

- It is very difficult for the gods to see the nature of suffering and practice Dharma
- We can see for ourselves how material possessions bring attachment and distraction
- Contemplating the suffering of the gods helps us appreciate this precious human life

The perfect human rebirth

1 Identifying the perfect human rebirth

1.4 The freedom of not being born as a long-life god



THE NEXT four freedoms are about being free from the four types of human existence that prevent us from developing our full potential. The first of these is the freedom to practice Dharma through not having been born at a time when no buddha has descended. Even if we were born human but in a dark age where there was no buddha and therefore no Dharma—no teachings leading us from nonvirtue to virtue—what would be the point of our human existence?

There are vast periods of time when there are no teachings of the Buddha and there is just complete darkness, no existence of the Dharma, no light of Dharma whatsoever. These are called dark periods. So, even though we may have been born human, due to karma we might have been born in a dark period, where there is no light of Dharma. Born at such a time, we would have no chance to even understand what virtue is, let alone create it.

The purpose of studying teachings on the perfect human rebirth is to realize how incredibly rare and unique this opportunity is. So often, when we have something precious we take it for granted until we have lost it, and then feel deep regret that we failed to appreciate what we had. Well, there's nothing more precious than the perfect human rebirth and there's no greater loss than not using it to realize our potential as a human being. Thus, once we understand this subject intellectually we need to meditate on it again and again until we realize it.

- If we were born in an age with no buddha we would never encounter the Dharma
- There are dark periods when the teachings of the Buddha do not exist
- We need to meditate again and again on our rare, unique and precious human rebirth

The perfect human rebirth

1 Identifying the perfect human rebirth

1.5 The freedom of not being born where no buddha has descended



THE SIXTH freedom is not being born as a “barbarian,” the literal translation of the Tibetan term *la lo*, which refers to somebody who lives in a border region or irreligious country and therefore has no chance to hear or practice Dharma. These outliers have no understanding of what is a positive action and what is a negative one, what is the cause of happiness and what is the cause of suffering.

Like a dark night without moon or stars, there is no sun of the Dharma and barbarians stumble from one suffering to the next. Without any concept of karma, how can they know why they suffer or what to do about it? Therefore, their whole lives are spent in chasing happiness in the wrong places, mistaking the cause of suffering for the cause of happiness. Because they have no faith in refuge and no understanding of karma, the thought of purifying negative actions cannot possibly arise in their mind. They have no opportunity to improve themselves, to purify their obscurations or negative karma accumulated in the past, no opportunity to practice the holy Dharma.

How amazing and precious is this time when we *do* have faith in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, the wish to practice Dharma and the opportunity to do so. However, knowing that life is like a water bubble and can end at any moment, we should determine strongly not just to practice Dharma but to practice Dharma *continuously*, from this moment on.

- If we were born as a barbarian we would have no opportunity to hear the Dharma
- Lacking any concept of karma or faith in refuge, barbarians are trapped in suffering
- We must appreciate this opportunity and practice Dharma continuously from now on

The perfect human rebirth

1 Identifying the perfect human rebirth

1.6 The freedom of not being born as a barbarian



THE NEXT freedom is the freedom to practice Dharma through not having been born a fool. Although the Tibetan, '*on pa*', literally means "deaf," it has the connotation of somebody utterly unable to understand or communicate. With this freedom, we are not just talking about people who have trouble understanding things; we are talking about people who have no way of taking in anything at all, people who have such extreme mental difficulty that their minds are incapable of functioning above a basic motor-function level.

This is not necessarily something we are born with. Karma can ripen at any time and we can lose the ability to understand or communicate. A car accident can leave us in a coma, a disease can turn us into a human vegetable, even age can rob us of our wits. These days, Alzheimer's and dementia are big problems for many old people. Think of how terrible it would be if we had started to study the Dharma and then, a few years later, were unable to remember even one syllable of a mantra because our memory had failed.

What is so unique about the position we are in is that we have a choice. We can choose to study the cause of happiness; we can choose to learn to use our mind as a tool to create that happiness by learning how to meditate. We can listen to great teachers and we have the intelligence to understand their message; we have the literacy to read Dharma books, the wisdom to see the truth in them and the intelligence to start to live our life according to the Dharma.

- If we were mentally incapacitated we would have no freedom to practice Dharma
- Karma can ripen at any time and take away our ability to understand or communicate
- We have the choice to study Dharma and use our mind as a tool for happiness

The perfect human rebirth

1 Identifying the perfect human rebirth

1.7 The freedom of not being born as a fool



THE LAST freedom is the freedom to practice Dharma through not having been born a heretic. In Buddhism, heresy is the belief that something that exists does not exist. There is such a thing as karma but a heretic will deny that. Similarly, to a heretic, the Buddha, liberation, enlightenment and the other important topics within Buddhism are just lies or fantasies—the self is permanent and independent, impermanent phenomena are permanent, suffering is happiness. Heretics also deny that there is such a thing as reincarnation; they believe that the consciousness stops at death.

With no karma and no life after death, there is no base upon which to develop morality. There is no cause and effect, therefore harming somebody will not bring future suffering and helping others will not bring future happiness. Following such wrong doctrines, heretics not only create the cause for heavy suffering, but such wrong views also become deeply entrenched, blocking any acceptance of the Buddhist path, no matter how often it is heard. Believing mistaken views creates the cause to hear them again, in this or a future life, and so the chances of understanding the Dharma become even more remote.

Heresy is a very ignorant mind. Imagine being a heretic. Imagine thinking that there is no such thing as cause and effect, that Buddha, Dharma and Sangha don't exist, that impermanent things are permanent and relying on them for happiness. Think how wonderful it is that we have met the Dharma and now have the opportunity to learn these profound subjects and turn our life around.

- If we were a heretic we would see all the important topics within Buddhism as false
- By following wrong doctrines, heretics have heavy suffering in this and future lives
- It's wonderful that we have met the Dharma and can turn our life around

The perfect human rebirth

1 Identifying the perfect human rebirth

1.8. The freedom of not being born as a heretic



THAT WE HAVE FOUND SUCH A PERFECT HUMAN
REBIRTH IS LIKE A DREAM, AS INCREDIBLE AS A
BEGGAR FINDING A DIAMOND IN THE GARBAGE
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

JUST AS there are the eight situations from which we are free that give this life great meaning, there are also ten things that we have received that enrich our life enormously. These are called the ten richnesses, or endowments. The first five are personal richnesses, things that we have within ourselves that make life so full: *being born as a human being, being born in a religious country, being born with perfect organs, being free from the five immediate negativities and having devotion to the teachings*.

By taking each richness in turn and building on it, we can see just how unique having a perfect human rebirth is. It's amazing to have a human body at all, but to have one and live in a religious country is even more amazing. And more amazing still is to be a human being in a religious country and to have perfect organs with which we can practice even Highest Yoga Tantra. Having just one richness is quite rare and having several of them together is far rarer still. To have all of them at once is unbelievably rare.

The more precious we feel our rebirth to be, the greater the happiness in our mind. Just as a beggar finding a diamond in the garbage would be overjoyed, that's how we should feel whenever we simply think, "I have received a perfect human rebirth." In this ordinary, mundane life full of work and problems, we have suddenly discovered a priceless jewel. When that happens and our Dharma practice becomes a ceaseless joy, it is a sign that we are making the most of our perfect human rebirth.

- The five personal richnesses are the qualities that enhance our lives
- It's unbelievably rare and amazing to have all these richnesses at the same time
- The more precious we feel our rebirth to be, the greater the happiness in our mind

The perfect human rebirth

1 Identifying the perfect human rebirth

1.9 The five personal richnesses



THE SECOND five richnesses relate to others: *being born at a time when a buddha has descended, being born when the teachings have been revealed, being born when the complete teachings exist, being born when the teachings are being followed and having the necessary conditions to practice Dharma.* There are so many factors that must come together before we can encounter and follow the Buddhist teachings that it sometimes seems a miracle that anybody is able to do it all.

However, the period of the existence of the Buddhadharma has almost finished. The teachings still exist but their time is almost up. There are still great teachers but for how long will they be around? The time is fast approaching where practicing Dharma will be totally impossible because the teachings will no longer exist on this planet. The path before us is illuminated by the light of Dharma but it is the last flickering of a dying candle. While it is still there we have the chance to create the cause for real happiness, to follow the method that cuts ignorance and delusion, to attain full enlightenment. That is why this human rebirth is so precious.

We have just made it. Like arriving at the airport moments before they close the gate and the plane is about to take off. If we had been born too late to receive the teachings—when all the Tibetan lamas had passed away and no one could reveal the complete path to enlightenment—it would be extremely difficult to even plant the seed of the entire path to enlightenment in our mind let alone hear the complete teachings. We have *just, just* made it.

- The second five richnesses are external factors that enable us to practice Dharma
- We have this precious opportunity only while the teachings still exist
- We are just in time, like arriving at an airport at the moment before the gate is closed

The perfect human rebirth

1 Identifying the perfect human rebirth

1.10 The five richnesses in relation to others



THE EIGHT freedoms and the ten richnesses are not just a list of ideals that cannot be matched. We already have most if not all of them. We have already come a long way on our journey to enlightenment. We should rejoice that this is so but must never be complacent. We have created the causes to get this far, to have this degree of freedom and richness, but we must continuously keep on creating such causes, otherwise we could easily lose our hard-won freedoms and richnesses.

When we're feeling down and depressed we should think of the suffering of the hells and realize that although we are not in those realms at the moment, the delusions that are currently troubling our mind can lead us there. When we are overwhelmed by desire we should think of the hungry ghosts who are tormented with unfulfilled craving caused by the strong attachment they had in previous lives and see how destructive it is. If we are bitten by a mosquito we should not get angry but reflect on the story of that mosquito—what caused it to take that body and need to drink our blood.

We can look at every freedom and richness in this way. We can take every experience every day and relate it to the freedoms and richnesses we have. Anything that happens in our daily life can be a Dharma teaching, telling us how incredible our life is and how rare these freedoms and richnesses are. Every experience we have can remind us that we must make the most of every opportunity to practice Dharma and destroy the delusions that still plague us. There is not one minute to waste.

- Great care must be taken not to lose our hard-won freedoms and richnesses
- We should compare our problems to the greater sufferings of the lower realms
- Every experience in daily life is a reminder to practice Dharma without delay

The perfect human rebirth

1 Identifying the perfect human rebirth



THIS PERFECT human rebirth is unbelievably useful in three ways: bringing us the temporal benefits of happiness in this and future lives; bringing us the ultimate benefits of liberation and enlightenment; and bringing us the benefit of allowing us to make every moment of this life highly meaningful. Whatever happiness we wish for can be ours. The temporal benefits—eons as a long-life god, future lives in pure lands and so forth—are called temporal not only because they are not the ultimate meaning of life but also because they are experienced while we are still in samsara and one day will end.

Whether we want to be born as a human being, a wheel-turning king or a long-life god, when we have a perfect human rebirth we can choose our rebirth. Even if we want to be reborn in a pure land to hear the teachings of the bodhisattvas and buddhas and quickly attain enlightenment, that is possible. Through having, in previous lives, kept pure morality, practiced great generosity and made stainless prayers to be born with these conditions, we have now received this perfect human rebirth. By doing the same in this life we can ensure another perfect human rebirth in the future.

Just as this life is the gift of the hard work we did in previous lives, our future lives are determined by what we do now. It is entirely up to us. We prayed strongly for a long time to have this opportunity; now we have to pray for the opportunity to continue this good work. Whatever rebirth we want is there waiting for us if we create its cause.

- The perfect human rebirth can bring us both temporal and ultimate happiness
- We can choose whether to be reborn as a human, king or god, or in a pure land
- Our future rebirth is determined by what we do now; it's entirely up to us

The perfect human rebirth

2 The benefits of the perfect human rebirth

2.1 Temporal benefits



OF THE three great purposes of the perfect human rebirth, the greatest meaning is the opportunity we have to attain full enlightenment. We have already seen just how rare and precious it is to have all eighteen attributes. The rarest of all is to have met a fully-qualified Mahayana virtuous friend who can show us not just some of the path but the whole path, without one single mistake. Only when we set our mind to attaining enlightenment in order to benefit all other sentient beings can we say we are truly using the full potential of our perfect human rebirth.

With the entire Buddhadharma at our fingertips and a pure guide to show us the way, we have the perfect conditions to go beyond this limited existence and eliminate all obscurations from our mind, developing the selfless wish to help all beings. This is possible. The road is there ahead of us: taking refuge, developing renunciation, cultivating compassion and bodhicitta and realizing the nature of reality. All it takes from our side is the determination to take that road. And using the techniques taught in Vajrayana with bodhicitta motivation, we can reach the end of that road very quickly, without having to wait the eons it would take following the Sutrayana path.

We need to see just how valuable this precious body is. We have been born human before; we have even had some of the freedoms and richnesses. But we have never had all of them at the same time, so our attempts at real happiness have been flawed and doomed to failure. Now we have all eighteen and, if we apply ourselves, liberation and enlightenment are possible.

- The perfect human rebirth offers the opportunity to attain full enlightenment
- We have the perfect conditions to follow the path and quickly reach our goal
- With this body, for the first time liberation and enlightenment are within reach

The perfect human rebirth

2 The benefits of the perfect human rebirth

2.2 Ultimate benefits



IF EXTRACTING the essence from our perfect human rebirth means practicing Dharma, then striving to attain bodhicitta and enlightenment is the heart of the essence. This is something we should do “all day and night.” There is not one second to waste; and with bodhicitta, every second becomes infinitely valuable.

When we light a stick of incense with bodhicitta motivation we are fulfilling our incredible potential because at that moment we are doing what we need to do to attain enlightenment. As that incense burns we are fulfilling our potential and as it finishes we are fulfilling our potential. Every action we do with bodhicitta motivation helps us fulfill our ultimate potential of enlightenment. If it were form, the merit we create by the charity of giving a crumb of food to an ant with bodhicitta would encompass the whole of space. We can do this because we have this perfect human rebirth.

Imagine if, when we were a child, our father had given us a bag of diamonds to save us from any difficulties in our life, but, being a child and not understanding what it was, we threw it into a river. Now, as an adult, we realize what we did. How terrible we would feel. That’s how we should feel whenever we realize that we have wasted a moment of this perfect human rebirth. If we could really understand how precious our life is we would never think about wasting even a second, and the thought of using it for even a moment’s nonvirtue would feel a greater loss than having thrown that bag of diamonds into the river.

- The perfect human rebirth enables us to make every second of our life beneficial
- Every action we do with bodhicitta motivation helps us to fulfil our potential
- Wasting a single moment is like throwing a bag of diamonds into the river

The perfect human rebirth

2 The benefits of the perfect human rebirth

2.3 How every moment can be beneficial



WHY is this perfect human rebirth so precious? Why do so few beings enjoy such an existence? Because the causes of a perfect human rebirth are so difficult to acquire. Without creating the cause, the result cannot happen. That is the most basic fact about karma. We have created the causes for this perfect human rebirth, so now we are enjoying it. Realizing how incredibly difficult it is to acquire such causes makes us appreciate the hard work we did in the past and generate the determination not to waste it now.

The causes of a perfect human rebirth are *morality, generosity* and *making stainless prayers to receive a perfect human rebirth in the future in order to benefit others*. In our previous lives we were not just moral, we observed pure morality by keeping the various levels of vows. In addition, we were incredibly generous. Furthermore, we saw that we could best advance on the path with a perfect human rebirth, so made many prayers for such a rebirth. Doing all this takes a very strong and determined mind, but obviously we must have created all the right causes and conditions, because now we are experiencing the result.

Until we reach a quite advanced stage, creating virtue is like pushing a huge boulder up a steep slope. One slip and it rolls back to the bottom and we have lost all that hard work. We can't get tired now. Think of how demoralized and frustrated we would feel if we let that boulder slip, knowing of all that wasted effort and how we would have to start from the very beginning again. We can't let that happen with this perfect human rebirth.

- A perfect human rebirth is very rare because its causes are so difficult to acquire
- The three causes are: *morality, generosity* and *making stainless prayers*
- It's vital not to waste all the past efforts that created this perfect human rebirth

The perfect human rebirth

3 The difficulty of acquiring a perfect human rebirth

3.1 How the causes are difficult to acquire



WE NEED TO REALIZE HOW INCREDIBLY RARE IT IS
 THAT WE HAVE MET THE DHARMA AND HAVE ACCESS
 TO THE ENTIRE TEACHINGS OF THE BUDDHA
 —LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

BUDDHIST TEXTS use many analogies to explain just how difficult it is to attain a perfect human rebirth, and because of that just how rare it is. The best-known analogy is that of the blind turtle surfacing through a golden ring.

Say there is a blind turtle that lives in the ocean, only coming up to the surface once every hundred years. On the surface of the ocean is a golden ring, constantly moving with the wind and tides. The blind turtle surfaces in a different place every hundred years and the ring is never in the same place either, so imagine how remote is the chance that the turtle would put its head through the ring. Such a thing is almost impossible, isn't it? Attaining a perfect human rebirth is even more unlikely.

Each of the elements in this story has a meaning. The ring signifies the teachings of the Buddha, and gold signifies their preciousness and purity. The turtle represents sentient beings, and living at the bottom of the ocean signifies always having to take rebirth in the lower realms. Being blind signifies being ignorant of the Buddhadharma, blind to what is virtue and what is nonvirtue. Just as the turtle swims helplessly around the vast ocean, the samsaric being constantly circles through the suffering realms. Only once in an inconceivably long period does the samsaric being happen to obtain an upper rebirth, symbolized by the turtle surfacing once every hundred years. So how rare it is that we can obtain not just a human rebirth but a rebirth with all eight freedoms and ten richnesses.

- There are many analogies for the difficulty of attaining a perfect human rebirth
- The story of the blind turtle demonstrates the extraordinary rarity of this rebirth
- Each element in the story has a symbolic meaning

The perfect human rebirth

3 The difficulty of acquiring a perfect human rebirth

3.1 How the causes are difficult to acquire

The story of the blind turtle



A PERFECT HUMAN rebirth needs not just a human body but the presence of the entire Buddhadharma, and this is incredibly rare. According to Buddhist cosmology, the period of the existence of a world system is divided into four great eons, each consisting of twenty intermediate eons. During the great eons of evolution, decay and emptiness there is no Buddhadharma at all. It can only exist during the eon of existence. And even then, the Buddhadharma exists for only a very short time.

Not only is this perfect human rebirth very rare in terms of time—now we are here at the very end of the existence of Dharma—but it is also rare in terms of numbers. Countless other sentient beings exist with us on this planet at this time, but how many are able to benefit from the teachings of the Buddha? Very, very few. The Buddha explained that compared with the number of beings in the lower realms, the number of beings in the upper realms is like the amount of dirt under a fingernail compared with the amount of dirt on earth. The number of lower realm beings is unimaginable. And as small as the number of beings in the upper realms is, the number of human beings is far, far smaller. And, of course, the number of human beings with a perfect human rebirth is far, far smaller still.

This is the rarest rebirth of all, the one that is hardest to receive. Without looking at the difficulty of creating the causes, without seeing the rarity of the existence of the Dharma, just considering numbers, this perfect human rebirth is extremely rare.

- We can access the entire Buddhadharma only during this eon of existence
- There are countless sentient beings, but very few can benefit from the Dharma
- This is the rarest rebirth of all, the one that is hardest to receive

The perfect human rebirth

3 The difficulty of acquiring a perfect human rebirth

3.2 The rarity of this life

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WE DON'T HAVE LONG TO PRACTICE DHARMA,
AND IF WE DON'T MAKE THE MOST OF THIS CHANCE
WHILE THERE'S STILL TIME, WE WILL SURELY LOSE IT
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

IF OUR life lasted a long time and was always perfect and if we could be assured of finding another good rebirth easily, we could relax and think about practicing Dharma sometime in the future, but that is not the case. Life is extremely short and starts to decay from the moment of birth. Moreover, we can never tell when it will end. Children and babies die; people just reaching adulthood die. Many people die from illness or accident in their middle age. The causes of death are many and the conditions for staying alive are few.

Say we are a jewel thief looking for a priceless diamond but the night is pitch black. Suddenly there is a lightning flash and there on the road is that diamond. We have only a second to pick it up before it becomes too dark to see it again. Taking the essence of our life is like picking up that diamond, something we can only do in this lightning-short life we have.

When we have a perfect human rebirth that we don't squander, our mind is relaxed and happy all the time. We have the perfect conditions, we are making the most of them and when we die it will be with a happy and peaceful mind. This is extremely important. When death shows up one day, whether we are eating, walking, partying, working on a project—whatever we are doing—we won't feel at all upset, regretting all the things we haven't done and experiences we haven't had. We will have done what we needed to do.

- Life is extremely short and starts to decay from the moment of our birth
- Taking its essence is like picking up a priceless diamond during a flash of lightning
- If we want to die with a happy mind we must avoid squandering this opportunity

The perfect human rebirth

3 The difficulty of acquiring a perfect human rebirth

3.3 The brevity of this life



SINCE WE WERE BORN WE'VE WASTED PRACTICALLY
EVERY MOMENT OF EVERY DAY, MONTH AND YEAR
—LAMA YESHE

IF WE check deeply to see if, since we were born until now, we've done anything that was really worthwhile in bringing us true happiness and a joyful life, do you think we'll find anything? Check up. Don't look at others; check yourself. It's not complicated: we have our body, speech and mind; just these three. Which of our actions have been worthwhile?

I'm going to suggest that most of the time our actions of body, speech and mind have produced only frustration and confusion. Check up: how many hours are there in one day? During how much of each of these hours have we been aware? How much of each hour has been positive? Check that way; it's very simple. The Buddhist way of checking is very scientific. Anybody can do it; we're not trying to be exclusive. It's realistic. We should check up for ourselves.

Even though we might say that we're following a spiritual path or leading a meditator's life, we're not serious. It doesn't matter if we sit in meditation, go to church on Sundays, visit the temple regularly or do any other kind of customary religious activity; that doesn't mean anything. The actions that we need to do are those that actually lead us to everlasting, peaceful happiness, the truly joyful state, not those that simply bring up and down transitory pleasure. Actions that bounce us up and down are not true Dharma, not true meditation, not true religion—here I can make a definitive statement. Check up: we might think we're doing something spiritual but is our polluted mind simply dreaming?

- Have we done anything that has brought us true happiness and a joyful life?
- Our actions of body, speech and mind often create frustration and confusion
- We need to check up whether we are genuinely following a spiritual path

The perfect human rebirth

4 Taking the essence of the perfect human rebirth



THE GREAT yogis of the past owned nothing yet were incredibly happy. The most famous example is Milarepa, the great Tibetan meditator who became enlightened in one brief lifetime of this degenerate age. Other than a place to meditate and a cooking pot, he had nothing—absolutely no money and not even any clothes other than a thin ragged cotton shawl. Yet he was unbelievably happy because he had the freedom to practice Dharma, and he had this freedom because he had—and valued—his perfect human rebirth. Because of this he was able to attain enlightenment in one brief lifetime.

Perhaps we think that Milarepa was somehow special or that it was easier to gain realizations in those days, whereas today things are much more difficult. But we have exactly the same kind of body and mind that Milarepa had. With the body that we have right now, we can achieve anything we want. We don't need any special circumstances other than the freedoms and richnesses we already have. Right now, at this moment, we have it all. And what we have is worth more than all the wealth of all the universes combined. This perfect human rebirth is that precious.

What greater wealth can there be than renouncing the source of suffering, understanding the nature of reality and cherishing others more than ourselves? What can be of more value than acquiring the most precious mind of all, bodhicitta, the mind that seeks enlightenment in order to help all other sentient beings? These are riches far beyond skies full of wish-granting jewels.

- Yogi of the past such as Milarepa owned nothing but were unbelievably happy
- Our freedoms and richnesses are more precious than the wealth of all universes
- The greatest riches of all are renunciation, bodhicitta and understanding reality

The perfect human rebirth

4 *Taking the essence of the perfect human rebirth*



IF WE DON'T START NOW, WHEN WILL WE?
THERE WILL NEVER COME A TIME WHEN THE
CONDITIONS ARE BETTER FOR DHARMA PRACTICE
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

TRADITIONAL TEACHINGS on the perfect human rebirth show us very clearly just how fortunate we are and how rare it is to be in the position in which we now find ourselves. At this moment we have in our hand the means to attain anything we want; we have the means to create the causes for perfect happiness.

Therefore, we must generate the determination to make the most of every moment. At this time, with this body and mind, in this environment, we have a unique and precious opportunity to understand the teachings of the Buddha and to generate the realizations of the path to enlightenment. If we attempt it, there is nothing we cannot do. We need to see this. We need to understand how limitless our potential is and not block our precious chance with delusions of incapability: "I can't do it! I'm hopeless."

It is time to have big thoughts—huge thoughts! It is time to make vast plans, to lay out the immense project ahead of us and feel happy that we can achieve our goal of developing ourselves to our ultimate potential. We have perfect role models in the Buddha and the numberless great yogis who followed him, as well as the precious lamas we have the fortune to be able to take teachings and gain inspiration from, and we know that we have exactly the same potential as they do. Shakyamuni was once exactly like us; His Holiness the Dalai Lama was once exactly like us. In turn, we can be exactly like them. All the conditions are there. What we now need is the determination to do it.

- With this perfect human rebirth, we can create causes for perfect happiness
- We must understand our limitless potential and make the most of every moment
- Now is the time to make vast plans to follow in the steps of Shakyamuni Buddha

The perfect human rebirth

Wrap-up

IT'S IMPORTANT for Dharma students to understand Lord Buddha's scientific teachings on impermanence and death and not try to hide from or escape the reality of death. We need to face it.

Of course, for people brought up the way they are these days, this topic might be a little bit too much, because in general nobody teaches us about this aspect of reality. When I talk about death we might think, "Oh, that's Lama's thing, not mine," even though it's an undeniable fact that illness and death are within us right now. How can we reject our own nature? How can we escape from death when we are living immersed in the conditions for it to arise right now?

That's why I always say that Buddhism is not diplomatic in character. It shows us straight up our own nature. But that doesn't mean we should cry emotionally, "No! That's too bad. I'm going to get sick and die. Dying is terrible!" We mustn't think in an ordinary way. Do we think that's wisdom? "Don't tell me that! I don't like it!" That's not wisdom. Check up carefully. Old people don't like that they're old so they just push back and deny it. Is that wisdom or not? From my point of view, from Buddhism's point of view, that's stupidity and ignorance. Rejecting how old we are; hiding from information about death. And we can't say that teachings on death are simply an Eastern custom. Is our death an Eastern custom? Has our death been created by Lord Buddha? No. Our death has not been created by Eastern custom, by Lord Buddha or by Buddhism. It's in our very nature, so how can we reject it?

- As Dharma students, it's vital to face up to the reality of impermanence and death
- We can't escape death when we are immersed in the conditions for it to arise right now
- Death is in our very nature, so it's stupid and ignorant to become emotional or to deny it



WITHOUT AN understanding of impermanence and death, we can work for neither our own true happiness nor that of others. Not only can we not begin to practice Dharma, it's even very difficult to control our desire and anger. We spend our whole life doing meaningless things and never have the chance to create any merit. Problems pour down upon us. Life becomes complicated and expensive and we become overwhelmed by worldly problems, money problems, health problems, mental problems, relationship problems. Then, when death comes, we see how much we have wasted our life and what terrible suffering awaits us.

Nothing we do becomes Dharma, not even our Buddhist practices. Eating, sleeping, working and shopping are all done with a sense of permanence, and hence only for our own self-cherishing mind. But so too are prostrating, meditating, saying mantras, reading Dharma books and so forth. Nothing becomes Dharma unless we have a sense of our own impermanence.

Dharma is that which holds us from suffering, and anything that does that lifts us from worldly concern. Can we become free of worldly concern without a sense of impermanence and death? To have the strength of mind that breaks the habitual clinging to sense objects needs much more than aspiration—we need to really feel from the depths of our heart that we could die at any time; we need a healthy fear of death. Then whatever we do will be beneficial, because it will be preparing us for a better future life rather than trapping us in this one.

- We cannot begin to practice Dharma until we understand impermanence and death
- Nothing we do with a sense of permanence is Dharma, not even our Buddhist practices
- A healthy fear of death gives us the strength to break free from worldly concerns

Impermanence and death

1 The drawbacks of not remembering death

1.1 We do not remember to practice Dharma



WHEN WE fail to remember death we are only concerned with the affairs of this life. Our life is filled with working and planning for mundane concerns, leaving no time to create any merit at all. We know logically that we must die, but that seems sometime in the future and we think there is no need to worry about it now. Living our life with the wrong conception that we definitely won't die today, nothing of any meaning gets done.

When we are faced with difficulties we are so filled with our own problems that we are totally unable to practice whatever Dharma we might have learned. Even when life is going smoothly, because we don't remember impermanence and death there are great hindrances to our Dharma practice. We have no time or energy to meditate. We have plenty of time to sleep or watch television, to eat food or look at the scenery, but reading a Dharma book or meditating seems less desirable. No matter what we do, there is always one more samsaric project to finish before we can find the time to practice Dharma. It is the nature of samsaric projects never to be finished but we foolishly think that the next one will be our last. While it is there, waiting for our attention, we cannot focus on the Dharma, so just this one more! The Dharma is postponed through not remembering impermanence and death, and then before we actually get around to practicing Dharma, we die.

When we find we have no time to practice Dharma, we should not blame our boss, our partner, our kids or our dog. It is purely the fault of not remembering impermanence and death.

- We know logically that we must die, but think there's no need to worry about it now
- Absorbed in never-ending samsaric projects, our practice is postponed and then we die
- By not remembering impermanence and death, we find no time to practice Dharma

Impermanence and death

1 The drawbacks of not remembering death

1.2 We postpone our Dharma practice



IF WE do not remember impermanence and death, then even if we try to practice Dharma it doesn't become pure Dharma. Perhaps we can overcome our reluctance to meditate and no longer postpone our practice, but somehow the energy is not there to make our practice effective. We sit down to meditate and our mind is sluggish or distracted, running off to other more exciting things. We know the value of prostrations and other practices for collecting merit but it seems very hard to actually do them.

We know practicing Dharma is important but we are unable to become fully involved with it, so nothing is done purely. In retreat we are conscious of wanting others to think we are sitting perfectly and are wonderful meditators; when we recite mantras we like to use a big expensive *mala* made of lapis lazuli. But because our mind is weak we get no realizations. Logically we know the dangers of attachment, yet we have no strength to overcome our attachment. Perhaps we take vows to protect our mind, but even then we don't have the conviction to keep them purely. Even if we do some real Dharma work, it is easily spoilt by being mixed with worldly concern.

We need to get to the stage where we can discard the need for the comforts of this life just as we discard used toilet paper. Such strength of mind will not come until we have developed a strong feeling for impermanence and death.

- If we fail to remember impermanence and death our Dharma practice will be impure
- Dharma practice and Dharma work are easily spoilt by being mixed with worldly concern
- Lacking a strong feeling for impermanence and death, we cling to the comforts of this life

Impermanence and death

1 The drawbacks of not remembering death

1.3 We practice but do it impurely



THE IMPURE MIND OF PERMANENCE CREEPS IN,
 ROBBING US OF OUR STRENGTH JUST AS A
 BURGLAR COMES TO STEAL OUR JEWELRY
 —LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

To AVOID the lower realms we need a positive mind as we die, and we can only be assured of that if our overall mindset is strongly positive. This means we must practice Dharma diligently and continuously. An on again, off again approach to Dharma is useless. Without a deep sense of impermanence and death, even if we have a powerful personality and approach our Dharma practice strongly, doing strict retreats, for example, our Dharma practice will not be consistent. We might have lapses where we forget the Dharma or just practice it half-heartedly. Dying at such a moment would undo all the good work we had done until then.

Check your own mind. Catch it unawares. While you are in the middle of thinking about something, stop and ask yourself, “Am I aware that I could die today?” Probably not. Perhaps you meditate on impermanence and death in the evening but by the time you get into bed you go to sleep with a sense of permanence. That is how pervasive the thought of permanence is. That is why we must keep returning to the teachings on impermanence and death again and again and again. We must keep reminding ourselves of the importance of developing the mind of impermanence and death.

We need to see just how deceitful the mind of permanence is. If it were a wrong but harmless mind, perhaps we could live with it, just as we can live with a limp or something like that. But it is a chronic disease that causes us to die with attachment and be reborn in the lower realms.

- Without a deep sense of impermanence and death our Dharma practice is inconsistent
- We need to check up on our mind and keep reminding ourselves that we could die today
- The mind of permanence is a chronic disease that leads to rebirth in the lower realms

Impermanence and death

1 The drawbacks of not remembering death

1.4 We practice purely but not continuously





EVERY SECOND we are running toward our death and there is nothing we can do about it. We can't stop for a second. Every second is one second closer to death. But because we don't appreciate this, not only do we fail to prepare for death, we ensure that there will be incredible suffering in our future lives. Concerned only with temporary, mundane happiness—the “happiness” that isn't happiness at all—we create negative karma. Not understanding the importance of remembering impermanence and death, we fail to see which actions are harmful and which are beneficial. In short, we have no idea what Dharma is.

If we could see the consequences of our actions we would be a great deal more careful, but we feel that we will live forever and that whatever we do is without consequences. We live our life heedless of the motivation for our actions and are ruled by the mind clinging to the happiness of this life. The eight worldly dharmas are our boss and we obey them completely. Regardless of the results, we pursue fame, reputation, comfort, possessions—whatever we wrongly see as the cause of happiness. And in doing so, we become increasingly trapped in samsara.

We spend our whole life doing only meaningless things and never have the chance to create any merit at all. Problems pour down on us. Life becomes complicated and expensive and we are overwhelmed by worldly problems, money problems, health problems, mental problems, relationship problems. Then, when death comes, we see how wasted our life has been and what terrible suffering awaits us.

- Instead of preparing for death, we are ensuring incredible suffering in future lives
- We cling to the happiness of this life and obey the eight worldly dharmas
- When death comes, we will see how we've wasted our life doing meaningless things

Impermanence and death

1 The drawbacks of not remembering death

1.5 We create nonvirtue



DEATH IS a reality and to deny it, as many people do, is very dangerous. We live our life in a hallucination, as if we are sleeping, not seeing the reality of life. We see things that are impermanent as permanent and are shocked when death, the big impermanence, comes. Suddenly, without warning, death is there facing us. Life is gone and there is nothing we can do about it. Our time to meditate, to develop our mind, has run out. Now, for the first time, we are facing the reality of life and no matter how much fear we have, there is no time to do anything to remedy it.

When that happens, there is so much regret. When we die, we evidently see our whole life clearly, like watching a documentary with everything we have ever done played back to us—all the mistakes, all the selfishness, all the harm we have done to others. We see how we have clung to the meaningless, transient pleasures of this life and how we have created nonvirtuous actions because of that. This is the documentary our mind shows us just before we die and it can be terrifying. I have often heard that when people go through this, they die overwhelmed with great terror and regret.

We might or might not see the shallowness of our life before we die, but we will certainly see it at death. Billionaires might have succeeded at worldly pursuits and have all the signs of material success, but they have probably failed at what is meaningful, and when death comes they must face this terrible fact.

- Death is a reality and to deny it, as many people do, is very dangerous
- When we die all our mistakes will appear to our mind, like watching a documentary
- If our life has not been meaningful, we will die with terrible fear and regret

Impermanence and death

1 The drawbacks of not remembering death

1.6 We die with fear and regret



THREE IS a huge difference between the worldly person who thinks about death and the Dharma practitioner. A worldly person has no control over death or the next rebirth—it's all under the control of delusion and karma—and so the thought of death is utterly terrifying. A Dharma practitioner has the means to ensure not just a good rebirth but another perfect human rebirth, the best possible rebirth to progress toward enlightenment.

Before, we had limitless time for the meaningless affairs of this life and could find no time for the Dharma. But now we are practicing, it is the other way around. We have time to study, meditate and retreat, and what is meaningless holds no interest for us anymore. The difficulties we encounter trying to practice Dharma drop away because we see that they mostly come from our own mind and are not caused by external circumstances.

When our relationship goes wrong, our most cherished possession is stolen or we lose our job—when something big happens in our life that previously would have caused us to completely lose our mind and maybe even contemplate suicide—we now remember impermanence and death and see that there is no point in being attached. The situation is there, but the minds of attachment and anger through which we view that situation are the real cause of suffering, the cause for rebirth in the lower realms. Remembering impermanence and death, we see how silly we are, and the negative mind that would have normally arisen in such circumstances vanishes. In just that second we save ourselves from the lower realms.

- As Dharma practitioners, we have the means to ensure another perfect human rebirth
- We lose interest in what is meaningless and find time for study, meditation and retreat
- By remembering impermanence and death we avoid the lower realms

Impermanence and death

2 The advantages of remembering death

2.1 We avoid the lower realms and attain a perfect human rebirth



THE THOUGHT of death makes us incredibly alert. If we were walking through a forest where there were tigers, our eyes would be wide open all the time. We wouldn't daydream at all. We would think only about the tiger and would be watching and listening carefully, fearful of every noise or movement. The tiger in the forest is our death, which can pounce at any moment. If we could see this, we would always be mindful. We would have no problem concentrating, and all the lamrim topics would not only make perfect sense but would be our protection—not from death, but from a miserable death and a terrible rebirth.

Just as we could never forget the tiger hidden in the bushes, we should never forget the death hanging over us. In that way, all the hindrances to our Dharma practice will drop away easily and completely. Remembering death makes us reassess our life and change our priorities—we no longer need the objects of the eight worldly dharmas. Whether we receive comfort or not is irrelevant in the same way that the beautiful flowers in the forest are irrelevant because of the tiger. All that matters is practicing Dharma, purifying our mind and creating merit to ensure a good rebirth.

For ordinary people, working for this life is easy and natural and practicing Dharma is difficult. For Dharma practitioners with a strong fear of death, it is the opposite: practicing Dharma is easy and spontaneous, and creating nonvirtue is unthinkable.

- We need to fear death as much as we would fear a tiger in a forest
- In this way, all the hindrances to our Dharma practice drop away easily and completely
- With a strong fear of death, creating nonvirtue becomes unthinkable

Impermanence and death

2 The advantages of remembering death

2.2 We attain great power to destroy the negative mind



REMEMBERING DEATH IS USEFUL NOT JUST AS
THE IGNITION SWITCH FOR OUR DHARMA PRACTICE
BUT THROUGHOUT OUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

IT IS vital to remember impermanence and death at the beginning of our spiritual journey because it generates the energy that gets us to start our practice and allows us to continue without difficulty. Our Dharma practice begins when we see beyond the happiness of this life and start to prepare for our future lives. This is the path of the lower capable being and includes basic lamrim meditations such as impermanence, the lower realms, refuge and karma. Remembering impermanence and death is like the fuel that propels a rocket or the butter that burns in a butter lamp. Without the fuel there can be no lift-off and without the butter there can be no light.

The graduated path of the lower capable being is followed by the paths of the middle and great capable beings, which lead us to liberation and enlightenment respectively. Although these levels of mind are much more advanced than the one we currently have, there are still obstacles to our practice due to the ripening of negative karmic imprints. Here, Dharma practice still requires effort, and if we are not careful and falter in our determination we can lose what we have achieved. That is why remembering impermanence and death is vital, even at these advanced stages. We still need the spur of knowing we may die at any moment to keep our Dharma practice strong.

It is important to remember impermanence and death even at the end of our Dharma practice, because it helps us determine how we die and where we are reborn. This understanding strengthens the higher realizations that we gain the end of our practice.

- Remembering death gets us to start practicing Dharma
- Remembering death keeps us practicing Dharma
- Remembering death allows us to complete our practice

Impermanence and death

2 The advantages of remembering death

2.3 We gain great benefit at the beginning, middle and end of our practice



BUDDHIST TEACHINGS explain that the most advanced Dharma practitioners feel joyful when they are dying, as if going home to see their family after a long absence or going on a picnic. Death does not bother them at all. Less accomplished practitioners are happy and comfortable at the time of death and are fully confident that they will have a happy rebirth. And even the least accomplished practitioners die without worry or fear. Enjoyment of death, as well as fear of death, is created by the mind; it does not exist from its own side.

It is quite normal for Dharma practitioners to prepare everything before they die. This refers not only to high lamas but to ordinary monks and nuns and lay people. They make sure not only that their room is clean but that all their possessions such as their altar and Dharma texts are tidy, and that all their other possessions have been offered to the monasteries and high lamas they have devotion to. Very often they send relatives and disciples away, wanting peace as they die.

Imagine what it would be like to approach death with a great sense of spaciousness and peace. Imagine what the great meditators feel: that this is a happy transition, like going on a picnic. Free from attachment, there are no problems weighing down the mind. There is no unfinished business, because we have done what we could with the best possible attitude. Loving the people around us without attachment, we are leaving them with the best possible gifts, our love and our good death, and we know that they will be all right. Wouldn't that be a death to look forward to?

- Dharma practitioners die without worry or fear, and may even feel joyful
- Practical preparations include tidying, cleaning and giving away all possessions
- It's possible to approach death with a great sense of spaciousness and peace

Impermanence and death

2 The advantages of remembering death

2.4 We die happily and without regret



WE WILL now look at three very important points: that death is certain, that the time of death is uncertain and that nothing can help us at death but the Dharma. These are the three “root truths” of the nine-point meditation on death that is taught extensively in Tibetan Buddhism. It is presented with three root truths, three reasons for each truth and three conclusions that follow on from them.

The only thing we can be sure of is that we will die. Death is definite. The plans we have for tomorrow or the next day are not definite, that we will be alive tomorrow is not definite, but that we will die is definite. And it is uncertain when we will die. We cannot guarantee we will live for many years or months. When we get up in the morning it is a misconception that we will definitely still be alive that same evening, just as it is a misconception that we will live to an old age.

Therefore, we should not shy away from studying death and meditating on the nine-point death meditation, the death process and the other meditations that bring home to us the urgency of our Dharma practice. It might be unsettling at first but it can also be liberating. And even if it is terrifying for us, we need the courage to face it, in the same way we need to face the pain of a surgeon’s scalpel when we have a tumor that needs to be excised. The sharp cut of a death meditation now frees us from the horrible disease of the lower realms later.

- The nine-point meditation on death is based on three root truths
- The only thing we can be sure of is that we will die—and the moment is uncertain
- It may feel terrifying to face up to our death, but it can also be liberating



NOBODY ESCAPES death. This is demonstrated by the life of the Buddha. He was born, became enlightened, and taught for over forty years, but even he had to die because he had taken a physical body. Dying was the Buddha's last great lesson on impermanence, showing us that death is an inevitable part of life. Great *arhats* have to die, bodhisattvas have to die and the holy beings who have shown us the Dharma in this very lifetime have to die. After death, only their names remain and we have nothing but their memory. Why do we think that we alone can escape this?

Our life is full of proof that people die every day, even though they never thought that they would, yet we ignore the evidence in front of our eyes. So many people have died today for countless reasons: through an illness such as a sudden heart attack or stroke, from a traffic accident or plane crash, while traveling, working or resting at home. Every second of the day people die holding the thought, "I will not die today." All the projects that filled their lives will now never be finished. A few hours ago they were dancing and now they lie on a slab in the morgue, immobile like a log of wood.

Reading the obituary column of a newspaper is a very good reminder of impermanence and death. Perhaps it should be re-named "All the people who didn't expect to die today but did," because for most of the names, that is the situation. Reading a newspaper in this way becomes a complete course in impermanence and death.

- Nobody escapes death, not even the Buddha, the great arhats and the bodhisattvas
- Every second of the day people die holding the thought "I will not die today"
- Reading newspaper obituaries is a good way to remember impermanence and death

Impermanence and death

3 The nine-point meditation on death

3.1 Death is certain

3.1.1 Everyone has to die



THE ARE many factors that can bring about premature death but there is nothing that can add to our lifespan. We have only so many years in this body and every second brings us closer and closer to death. Karma has determined that we have this human body with its particular attributes, and one of those is our lifespan. As soon as we are conceived in the womb, that lifespan starts running out, like sand in an hourglass.

People in the modern world seem ruled by the clock—always busy, always aware of what time it is. This is very good if we use the clock to see how our life is ticking away and how every second that passes and every tiny thing we do is bringing us that much closer to death. On this basis, I recommend just looking at a watch or clock for an hour or two. This might seem strange and even a waste of time, but if we just concentrate on the second hand going around and around, ticking off the minutes and seconds, we can really get an appreciation of how quickly our life is running out.

Although we naturally say “I am living,” in fact we are not living, we are dying. Just as when a person is going through the death process and there are definite signs of death, we have the signs of death now but we don’t notice them. Year by year, day by day, those signs are increasing, yet we ignore them. Our body is aging, our breath is weakening and our health is declining. We are slowly winding down like an old-fashioned wind-up watch.

- Our lifespan starts running out as soon as we are conceived
- We can use a watch or clock to see how every passing second brings us closer to death
- Although we say “I am living,” in fact we are not living, we are dying

Impermanence and death

3 The nine-point meditation on death

3.1 Death is certain

3.1.2 Our lifespan is continually decreasing



PERHAPS WE feel that there is plenty of time ahead of us to practice Dharma. As we have seen, that is not the way it is at all, and, furthermore, the years we do have are filled with mundane concerns. With so much time taken up by worldly activities there is no time to practice Dharma.

Look at how much time we *don't* spend practicing Dharma. Let's say we live for a hundred years. Half of each day is spent asleep and it is very difficult to create virtue while we are sleeping, therefore we are only talking about fifty years. For the first fifteen years or so of our life we are children, playing and lacking the wisdom to make life meaningful at all. For the last fifteen years of our life we are too old to do anything but wait around to be fed and washed.

So, of the fifty years we are talking about there are only about twenty where we have the opportunity to practice Dharma, but how much do we actually do? Think about it. Most of each day is spent in meaningless activities, and even if we have a set meditation practice, say an hour a day, during that time we are distracted or dull, unable to concentrate and therefore completely unable to practice purely. When we do create a positive action, it is usually clouded by some delusion, such as pride when we have been generous, or anger that somebody hasn't thanked us enough for our help. We would be lucky if we could add up a year in that whole life that could be called Dharma practice.

- With so much time taken up by worldly activities we have no time to practice Dharma
- The majority of our life is taken up by meaningless sleep, childhood and old age
- Even our positive actions are usually marred by distraction, dullness and negativity

Impermanence and death

3 The nine-point meditation on death

3.1 Death is certain

3.1.3 There is very little time to practice Dharma



IF WE DON'T HARNESS OUR MENTAL ENERGY,
 CONFUSION WILL CONTINUE TO RAGE THROUGH
 OUR MIND AND OUR LIFE WILL BE COMPLETELY
 WASTED —LAMA YESHE

IF WE understand impermanence there's no upset, no misery; we accept death as a natural thing. Everything is transitory, momentary; nothing lasts. We cling to things because we think that they're helpful, but we must try to ascertain whether they really help or harm our mind. Perhaps instead of inducing peace of mind they prevent it.

Dharma wisdom, however, is always with us and makes us happy. Material things, the things we think our life depends on, are unreliable—sometimes with us, sometimes not. Also, psychologically, material possessions can become our worst enemy. When we're dying and have to leave them, we feel miserable. The more we have, the worse we feel. Check up right now. We can see that our mind is drawn toward whatever our attachment has labeled "good." Check up in meditation. Therefore, at the time of death, when we know that we're losing forever everything that we possess, all these things simply serve to make us more agitated. That worried mind itself almost kills us. Our elements are already completely out of balance; the mental shock of losing all our possessions delivers the final blow.

If somebody beats us up we get really upset, but a beating lasts only a short time. The worrying mind beats us up day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, and lifetime after lifetime. Even now we're completely under its control. We think we're free, but we're not. Therefore, we have to determine, "Dharma wisdom is the only solution to my problems; the only vehicle that can carry me to everlasting happiness. Only Dharma can truly save me from danger."

- If we understand impermanence there's no misery; we accept death as a natural thing
- Material things are unreliable and can be our worst enemy, especially at the time of death
- Dharma wisdom is the only solution to our problems and the source of happiness

Impermanence and death

3 The nine-point meditation on death

3.1 Death is certain

Conclusion: We must practice Dharma

THE ARE other world systems where the lifespan is fixed—where the beings in that world know exactly how long they will live. The texts specifically mention the humans of the northern continent, who will definitely live for a thousand years. However, since there is no fixed lifespan in our world system we have no way of knowing when we might die, even if we die naturally of old age. In these degenerate times our lifespan is even more indefinite, as the factors that determine death increase.

We don't actually say to ourselves when we wake up every morning "I will never die," but there is an unconscious feeling that we will live for a very long time, long enough to feel permanent. When we are twenty, we feel there are at least sixty years ahead of us; when we are forty, we feel there are at least forty years ahead of us; when we are sixty, we *still* feel there are at least forty years ahead of us. Even if we'd held such a thought when we were two years old, that would have been totally unrealistic. We just don't know.

We need to change our certainty that we won't die into the certainty that we will. When we can go to bed with the thought that we have no idea whether we will wake up the next morning or not, then we can be happy that we are overcoming the traps of the worldly mind. When we intuitively hold a sense of impermanence, then we are really preparing for death and guaranteeing our happy future rebirth.

- There is no fixed lifespan in our world system so we don't know when we will die
- Our unconscious feeling that we will live for a very long time is totally unrealistic
- We need to change our certainty that we won't die into the certainty that we will

Impermanence and death

3 The nine-point meditation on death

3.2 The time of death is uncertain

3.2.1 The lifespan of human beings is not fixed

A CANDLE IN a strong wind is in great danger of being blown out. Our human life is the same. This is a very good analogy, because our life is just like that flame, which may look bright but is easily extinguished. With negative emotions strongly in our mind, negative karma can easily ripen and death can be caused by many different factors. Anger at a partner can lead to violence and murder; miserliness can lead to misery and suicide—there are so many things that can go wrong. When the elements in the body are out of balance, death can easily happen.

We can die from many causes, and there are so many potential causes everywhere we look: disease, accidents, murder and disasters. Think of how many accidents people have in a normal life, any one of which could potentially be fatal. Think of all the everyday things that as a matter of course we treat with caution to avoid death. We have to check that our food is safe, wear a seatbelt in our car, watch for red lights and step carefully when we go down stairs. Life is a series of hazards that we negotiate every day.

The truth is that we can die at any moment and we could have died at any time in our life until now. How thankful we should be that we did not die in the womb or as a baby and that disease or an accident did not kill us as a child or teenager. When we consider the risks we face every day we should be amazed that we have lived this long.

- Our life is like a candle in a strong wind, which may look bright but is easily extinguished
- We can die from any cause and there are potential causes everywhere we look
- Considering the risks we face every day, we should be amazed we have lived this long

Impermanence and death

3 The nine-point meditation on death

3.2 The time of death is uncertain

3.2.2 There are many causes of death

WHEN WE consider our body, it really is an amazing machine, with the heart pumping blood all around and every organ with its separate vital function. We take for granted the miracle that is our body, and because of that we fail to see how fragile it is and how easily it can break down.

We see ourselves as a very concrete, solid, permanent thing into which the air just keeps going in and out and the heart just keeps on beating. This is a very deluded way of thinking about our body. It is not up to us how long we keep breathing. If it were, we would keep breathing forever. Instead, the breath is not under our control: we are completely under its control. Our life depends entirely on the movement of the air going in and out of our body and that movement can be stopped at any time by the slightest thing. In time there will definitely be an out-breath not followed by an in-breath. That is a truly frightening thought.

Anything can affect this fragile machine. Things that are meant to enhance our life can finish up ending it. There are many ways that food can kill us: we can die from lack of it or from overeating or choking on it. Medicine that is supposed to preserve our life can turn against us. Houses that should protect us can collapse and kill us. If we don't watch where we're going we can fall and kill ourselves. A microscopic virus can end our life; a tiny cell can become cancerous and finish us off. A small thorn can pierce our flesh and poison our blood. Even a bee sting can be fatal. That's how fragile our body is.

- We take our amazing body for granted and fail to see how easily it can break down
- Our life depends entirely on our breath, which can be stopped at any time
- There are many conditions that can destroy this fragile machine that is our body

Impermanence and death

3 The nine-point meditation on death

3.2 The time of death is uncertain

3.2.3 Our body is extremely fragile



How do we turn our current way of living around completely? By remembering death and impermanence. Without that strong spur, it is difficult not to be lazy. We think that Dharma is a nice idea but somehow never quite get around to practicing it. As long as the world seems comfortable and the experience of sense pleasure is the real reason behind our actions, we will never be successful. If we face the imminence of death, however, we will quickly realize what we need to do and will have the energy to do it.

Unaware of the fragility of this life, we find it hard to think beyond the mundane existence we are trapped in. “Sure, sure. I could die on the way to the store, but I won’t, and I have to hurry before it closes otherwise I won’t have any milk for my tea.” We might think the words but we don’t really believe them, and so practicing Dharma effectively is difficult. That is why I emphasize the importance of really understanding the great truth that we can die at any moment. Until that truth becomes a reality in our life we will face difficulties all the time when we want to be virtuous. Laziness and self-interest will always obscure what is important.

If we live next to a river that is rising and about to flood, we shouldn’t wait until water is pouring into our house before doing something to escape. We need to see the danger and take precautions before it’s too late. In the same way, we need to take precautions so that we can die with a virtuous mind and be assured of a positive rebirth.

- The only way to turn our way of life around is by remembering the imminence of death
- Until we understand the fragility of our life, it’s difficult to practice Dharma effectively
- We need to take precautions immediately to secure a positive death and rebirth

Impermanence and death

3 The nine-point meditation on death

3.2 The time of death is uncertain

Conclusion: We must practice Dharma right now



THE POOREST beggar and the richest billionaire are exactly equal in what they can physically take into the next life—nothing. Billionaires work day and night all their life to acquire what they have; they fight competitors and make enemies, they exploit people and lie and cheat. They live in huge mansions and palaces, and every day eat the most expensive and delicious food in the world and wear the most expensive clothes. And yet these possessions are worthless at the time of their death. They must leave all these things behind, so what is the point of all that hard work to acquire them? At least beggars don't have to devote their entire life to acquiring their begging bowl.

After we die, what will happen to all our things? We will have nothing more to do with them, and no choice but to leave everything behind. Possessions that are useless to a corpse will be used by others. People will say “These things belonged to . . .” and they will say our name. That is what we will be reduced to—a name.

How much work has been involved in obtaining our possessions? Think of all the years spent studying and working, earning more and more money to buy more and more things. Think of all the negative actions carried out while acquiring those things: all the anger, the desire, the jealousy and so forth. And yet, when we die all the things we have acquired over our lifetime will be left behind, without choice. The only thing we will take with us is the negative karma we created in obtaining our possessions.

- The possessions of even the richest billionaire are worthless at the time of death
- When we die, there is no choice but to leave everything behind
- All we take with us is the negative karma we created in acquiring our possessions

*Impermanence and death**3 The nine-point meditation on death**3.3 Nothing can help except Dharma**3.3.1 Possessions and enjoyments cannot help*



ALL RELATIONSHIPS are transitory, even the rather special relationships between Dharma brothers and sisters, and grasping at such relationships is obviously a great hindrance to our practice. We must understand that as soon as we have met someone, the cause for our eventually splitting up has been created. Meeting always leads to separation; if we investigate our own experiences we shall see that this is true. No matter how much pleasure we receive from someone or from something, the time will come when our connection to that person or thing will be no more.

It does not require too much reflection to see that this is true. Everything is momentary, and when the actual time of death comes, none of the people or things we have met with can help us at all. Worse than that, not only do they fail to help us but, because of our attachment to them, they also create great problems for us.

If we think about it we can see how our closest companion can easily become our worst enemy. Take the example of a couple who have lived together for forty or fifty years. When one of them dies, the other is often so heartbroken that he or she cannot go on living. In some places in India, when the husband has died, his wife throws herself on his funeral pyre. This is nothing but ignorance and, to some extent, we all behave in similar manner. That is why it is important to prepare ourselves now.

- All relationships are transitory, and grasping at them is a great hindrance to our practice
- At the time of death our friends can't help us and may even create great problems
- We should prepare ourselves now for the inevitable separation from our loved ones

Impermanence and death

3 The nine-point meditation on death

3.3 Nothing can help except Dharma

3.3.2 Friends and relatives cannot help

IN SOME ways our greatest possession is our body. This is the thing that we cherish most in this life. Think of how much time, effort and money has gone into our body. We take such lavish care of it: feeding it, clothing it, giving it shelter from the weather and giving it medicine when it is sick. We not only ensure its survival, we do everything we can to make it as comfortable as we can, indulging in all the sense pleasures we can find. Without food and drink, this body would perish, therefore we go to work, spending many hours each week just to earn money for the food it needs.

We worship our body like a god. This all seems a bit strange when any day now our body will be a small pile of ash on the crematorium floor. We go to bed one evening thinking about what clothes to wear tomorrow and by the morning all that is irrelevant, and other people are worrying about how to clothe the corpse for the funeral. All they have left is a lump of dead meat called a corpse, something they dare not even touch.

Borrowed from our parents, destined to become a corpse very soon, why should we place so much importance on this body? Thogme Zangpo compares the body to a guesthouse that the temporary guest, the mind, will soon leave. The mind will then take residence in another temporary “guesthouse,” and then another and another, continuously, until we break the cycle.

- Our body is our greatest possession and the thing we cherish most in this life
- Any day now this body that we worship will be a corpse or a pile of ash
- The body is nothing more than a temporary guesthouse for the mind

Impermanence and death

3 The nine-point meditation on death

3.3 Nothing can help except Dharma

3.3.3 Our body cannot help

WE HAVE seen that possessions, reputation, friends, loved ones and even our body are unable to bring us any help as we die—so what else is there? Only dying with a positive state of mind can help. To die free from the three poisons, but especially without attachment, means that we can have a peaceful and happy death and a good rebirth. This is definitely possible. And the only way we can secure such a positive mind is by practicing Dharma. Only the Dharma can help us at the time of death. Only when we are strong in Dharma do we have the power to die without worry and concern, and to know that after death there will be a positive future rebirth.

There is no other question we need to ask ourselves other than, “Do I want to have a happy or a miserable death?” If we can truthfully answer that question, then all the other questions we face in life will fall away and the only priority in everything we do will be to ensure a happy death. Without understanding this vital point nothing really makes sense. When we understand that what we most need to do is prepare for death, life becomes very simple. Every choice we face from then on is a choice between a happy death and a miserable one.

When we examine this, it is very, very clear that the only way to have a happy death is to have a completely virtuous mind. That will only come about by acting virtuously, and this is what “practicing Dharma” means. Nothing else will help at the time of death.

- If we want to die without worry or concern, it's vital to practice the Dharma
- Life is very simple when preparing for death is our only priority
- The only way to have a happy death is to have a completely virtuous mind

Impermanence and death

3 The nine-point meditation on death

3.3 Nothing can help except Dharma

Conclusion: We must practice Dharma and only Dharma

DAY 111



WHEN WE ACTUALLY HAVE THE REALIZATION
OF IMPERMANENCE AND DEATH, WE WILL
NEVER DO ANYTHING MEANINGLESS AGAIN
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

SEEING HOW our life is full of thousands of life-threatening hindrances and how incredibly easy it is for death to happen, it's a miracle that we wake each next morning. It's as if we're living on a thin rock overhang on top of a high mountain, with the valley way below, unaware that the overhang can barely take our weight. One false move and we can easily find ourselves falling to our death.

And yet, despite how possible that is, somehow, amazingly, we have woken this morning still in this precious human body. Every second we have is more precious than the whole sky filled with wish-granting jewels. If we could really think like this, there's no way we could ever waste even one second of this perfect human rebirth, this incredible vehicle that can carry us to enlightenment.

That is why it is very important to reflect again and again on this nine-point death meditation with the three main points: that death is definite, the time of death is indefinite and the only thing that can help at death is the Dharma. We should develop the firm conviction that we could very easily die at any moment; that we might go to sleep tonight and not wake up tomorrow.

- It's a miracle that we wake each morning after going to sleep the night before
- If we realized the preciousness of our human body we would never waste even one second
- It's very important to reflect again and again on the nine points of this meditation

Impermanence and death

Wrap-up

HERE IS nothing to be afraid of about death. Death is not difficult: it is nothing more than the consciousness leaving the body. That's all. The connection with the body finishes, the mind leaves the body and finds another one. On this basis, why does death appear so difficult and frightening to so many people? It is not death itself that is frightening but the mind's projections about death that make us afraid. Our own mind creates the fear, not death itself.

The concept of a fearful death has been created by the mind that clings to the “permanent” things of this world—all the things that will be lost when death happens—our body, friends, possessions and so forth. Not being able to let go of life and the things of this life, death becomes terrifying. The unsubdued mind that is controlled by attachment to worldly pleasure creates this fear, not death itself. It is the creation of ignorance, attachment and anger and yet, even though it is nothing but a hallucination, we believe in this independent and frightening death.

Wise fear is completely different. Instead of being afraid *because* of our delusions, we see how deluded we are and are afraid *of* our delusions. We see the suffering our delusions will cause us and are afraid of that suffering; afraid enough to do something to avert it. We see samsara not as a beautiful park but as a terrible prison that we are all trapped in. From that, the wish arises to free not just ourselves but all sentient beings.

- It is not death itself but the mind's projections about death that make us afraid
- Death becomes terrifying when we are unable to let go of the things of this life
- Instead of being afraid *because* of our delusions, we should be afraid *of* our delusions

Impermanence and death

Wrap-up

THIS LIFE is as brief as a flash of lightning. Perhaps it doesn't feel like that at this moment, but when we die we will realize just how short our life has been. Despite this, we waste it by clinging, spending our life chasing trivial sense pleasures. Even if intellectually we know that something cannot last, we cling to it as if it will.

If we could really understand the transience of this life and all the things in it at a deep level, we would have no problems with attachment and aversion. Lama Tsongkhapa urges us to extract the essence of this life day and night. This is very important. If we think about impermanence only occasionally, when we are depressed or upset or in retreat, and don't consider it at other times, we will fail to make any deep life changes.

On the other hand, if we can make the understanding of impermanence a part of our very existence, we will be able to completely destroy our delusions. The terrible problem that was making us miserable and seemed impossible to solve will instantly be no problem at all. If we sit down to think about this huge problem and then bring to mind the atomic bomb of impermanence, suddenly, in that same chair, that huge problem will no longer exist. The desire that tormented us and the frustration that stopped us from sleeping will be destroyed in an instant and we will experience real peace and satisfaction.

- This life is as brief as a flash of lightning, yet we waste it on trivial sense pleasures
- To make deep changes in our life, we need a profound understanding of its transience
- Understanding impermanence completely destroys our delusions and brings real peace

Impermanence and death

Wrap-up

IF WE examine the mental states that dominate our mind, we will see that we create a huge number of negative actions every day, many more than positive actions. Similarly, if we look back on our life and consider our previous lives as well, we will see a huge mountain of negative karma waiting to ripen. Therefore, it is much more likely that we will be reborn in the suffering lower realms than in the fortunate upper realms, and it is crucial to understand exactly what the lower realms and their causes are in order to do everything possible to avoid them.

We also need to understand that at this moment the vast majority of our kind mother sentient beings are experiencing great suffering and will continue to do so for eons and eons. We should not turn away from this suffering but face it and see that this is reality; this is the way of samsara. From that we need to develop deep compassion and the sense of responsibility that “I myself alone must save each and every sentient being from the terrible suffering in which they are trapped.”

Far from plunging us into depression and hopelessness, an understanding of the lower realms is the route to becoming a bodhisattva, with a mind that is incredibly light and free, a mind that is totally focused on the welfare of others. The lower realms are very helpful in giving us the opportunity to develop such a mind. Without it, “compassion” is just a word—a lovely word, but ultimately without much meaning. This is why we need to remember the lower realms, especially the hells, every day.

- To be able to avoid the lower realms it's crucial to understand them and their causes
- We need to face up to this suffering and respond with compassion and responsibility
- Remembering the lower realms will enable us to develop the mind of bodhicitta



WE NEED TO BE CONVINCED THAT THE LOWER
REALMS REALLY EXIST AND IT IS HIGHLY LIKELY
THAT'S WHERE WE WILL BE REBORN
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

BECAUSE WE have been creating negative karma all our life we are almost certain to be reborn in the suffering lower realms. We only have to observe our actions over one day to see how most of what we do is dictated by self-cherishing and clinging to the affairs of this life, and is thus only nonvirtue.

From the moment we arise and have that first cup of coffee, do we work selflessly for others or selfishly for ourselves, trying to obtain a bit of sense pleasure and enjoyment? Is going to work, talking to colleagues, having lunch, going out at night and so forth done purely with bodhicitta, to attain enlightenment in order to free all beings from suffering, or done solely for our own comfort? If we examine our motivation we will probably see that most of our actions are done out of self-interest. If that is so, then great suffering awaits us after we die and we had better do something drastic from now on. We do virtuous actions imperfectly but nonvirtuous ones perfectly, like a true expert. Motivated by selfishness, we harm others and ourselves and ensure future lives of incredible suffering.

The descriptions of the lower realms are terrifying, but we need to be terrified. This is not a numbing fear, a fear that paralyzes us, but a positive fear that spurs us into action and gives us ironclad determination to practice Dharma and do nothing but practice Dharma. We see the suffering that we are in imminent danger of experiencing and naturally do everything possible to avoid it. The stronger our terror of the lower realms, the stronger our determination never to experience it.

- When we die we will almost certainly be reborn in the lower realms
- Our virtuous actions are imperfect but our nonvirtuous actions are perfect
- A healthy terror of the lower realms will bring a strong determination to avoid them



WHEN WE look at the states from which we are free we might reject certain ideas because they seem too outrageous. But can we really be so sure that what the Buddha said about the lower realms is just make-believe? We don't know everything. We don't remember most of what has happened to us since we were born. We presume we spent nine months in our mother's womb but we only have logic and her telling us as evidence. Defining what is reality and what is myth based on our own very limited understanding is very dangerous.

Moreover, to say that we are right and that the Buddha and all the highly realized yogis who came after him were in error is not only arrogant and wrong-headed, it is also extremely disrespectful. To say, "I like Buddhism but some bits are wrong" will lead to confusion and act as a barrier to real development.

Our knowledge is severely limited, while that of the buddhas is limitless, yet when we hear about the hell realms we decide that the wisdom of the buddhas is superstition while ours is superior. This is very deluded thinking. Most probably we find the teachings on the lower realms difficult or impossible because we are too scared to let our mind accept them and therefore refuse to believe that there can be such suffering. We need to explore our own limitations rather than reject the teachings. It is painful to have to acknowledge that there is such suffering, but that is the reality of life, that is samsara. We just can't see it now because our mind is so polluted.

- It's dangerous to define what is reality or myth based on our limited understanding
- To reject certain Buddhist teachings because we don't like them only leads to confusion
- We tend to avoid the teachings on the lower realms because they're scary



A HELL BEING's whole existence is nothing but suffering. It's more than a human being can even imagine, and far more than the suffering of the most miserable animal or hungry ghost. The sufferings we can see in our own world—of people being killed in explosions or earthquakes, of animals being burnt to death or boiled alive, of all the victims of torture and drought—is nowhere near the suffering of a hell being, who must experience this for an unendurable length of time.

Hell is not exclusive to Buddhists. Christianity, Islam and Hinduism all have descriptions of hell that are very much like those in the Buddhist texts. What is different about the Buddhist concept of hell is that, unlike the Christian concept, it isn't permanent. I haven't read the Bible and therefore I'm not completely sure about this, but it seems that after death a person either goes to heaven or hell, and whatever the outcome, that's it forever—once in hell there is no escape.

According to Buddhism, nothing is permanent, including hell, even though the eons a hell being spends there might seem like forever. In a way, hell is like a bad trip on drugs. The vision of the world alters into something utterly fearful and at the time there is no way of reversing it. But sooner or later the effect of the drug wears off and the more "normal" vision of the world returns. The karma that propels somebody into hell will finish at some stage. When that happens, the hell realm experience finishes and that being is reborn in another realm.

- A hell being's entire existence is nothing but suffering for an unendurable length of time
- In contrast to other religions, Buddhism doesn't consider hell to be permanent
- Eventually this karma will end and the hell being will be reborn elsewhere

IT'S NOT as if someone in a place called hell built an iron house, lit a blazing fire and thought, "Aha! I am waiting for Thubten Yeshe. Soon he will die and come here. I'm ready for him!" It is not like that. Hell does not exist in that way. The reality is that at the time of death, the powerful energy of the previous negative actions of a being, existing as imprints on their mind, is awakened, activated, and creates that being's experience of intense suffering, which we call hell.

When we look at the lamrim merely intellectually, we might think that hell is something real, existing from its own side—that there exists something concrete, built up. Then we think, "Oh, that's impossible!" and we doubt the existence of such things. However, Shantideva's explanation of the fires of hell and so forth makes them easy for Westerners to understand: our miserable view of reality is made up by our own mind, our own immorality, just as our blissful view of reality is made up by our own mind, our own virtue.

So the question is, what is reality? That's all. In all of Lord Buddha's teachings, with every important point he makes, he is saying that the mind is the principal producer of reality. Human goodness comes from the mind. Human problems, human badness, come from the mind. The hell beings' horrible visions of fire all come from the mind. Of course, good and bad exist, but only relatively. They exist only at the relative level, not ultimately. Psychological energy and various cooperative causes combine and transform into our vision of reality.

- Hell is created through the activation of the energy of our previous negative actions
- Both our miserable and blissful views of reality are made up by our own mind
- Good and bad exist, but only at the relative rather than the ultimate level

ANGER CAN easily result in a rebirth in the hell realms, especially if our anger is directed at a powerful object, such as our parents, the Three Rare Sublime Ones—Buddha, Dharma and Sangha—or, especially, our guru. Abandoning our guru as an object of respect is the heaviest downfall. Criticizing the guru is equal to criticizing all the buddhas. Pabongka Dechen Nyingpo explains that being angry with our guru for the duration of a finger snap causes us to remain in the inexhaustible hot hell for many eons.

Some texts specify that heresy, or perverted views—such as denying that reincarnation exists—results in rebirth in the cold hells. That, of course, is not the only cause. There are many additional causes, such as stealing clothing that others rely on for warmth and so forth.

Breaking any of the vows that our guru has given us is extremely negative and can result in rebirth in the hells. Breaking one of the lay vows, such as committing a complete act of killing, stealing, lying or sexual misconduct, or one of the eighteen root bodhisattva vows is also very heavy. And it is said that breaking a root tantric vow results in an eon in the lowest hell for every split second that elapses between breaking the vow and purifying it. Keeping our vows purely is the quickest way to become enlightened. Therefore, once we have taken vows we should always be mindful never to break them.

- Anger easily brings rebirth in hell, especially when directed at a powerful object
- The many causes of rebirth in the cold hells include heresy and stealing warm clothing
- Breaking our vows and failing to purify them often leads to a rebirth in the hell realms

The lower realms

1 The hell realms

1.1 Causes of the hell realms



JUST AS A SEED GROWS UNTIL IT BREAKS THE SURFACE AND BECOMES A PLANT, NEGATIVE IMPRINTS RIPEN AT THE TIME OF DEATH TO DETERMINE OUR NEXT REBIRTH —LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

WHEN SOMEBODY dies with an extremely negative mind and is destined to be reborn in the hell realms, they experience a terrible death. A person who is going to be born in the hot hell realms feels very cold. No matter how high the heating is turned up, no matter how many blankets they are covered in, they still feel unbelievably cold. They shiver uncontrollably and become demented with cold. The karmic seed left on the mental continuum motivated by ignorance becomes stronger, manifesting as a strong craving for heat, and when they finally die with their mind full of that craving it throws them into the hot hells.

Conversely, if somebody has the karma to be reborn in the cold hells, that person will feel incredibly hot at the time of death. They will feel as if their body, the bed and the whole environment are on fire and will crave coolness. No matter how cold the room, they will still feel as if it's a furnace. Dying with this craving for cold, they are propelled into the cold hells.

There are many stories of people having fearful visions just before they die. People who have killed other people or who regularly slaughter animals; soldiers and torturers; people whose mind is full of violence—such people have a terrible death. Very often their last hours are full of dreadful images, as if they are already in hell before they die. Their mind is strongly clouded with negativity and since they have never done any purification, as they leave this life the karma for a hell existence starts to manifest.

- A person about to be reborn in the hot hells will feel intense cold at the time of death
- Somebody heading for the cold hells will feel incredibly hot and die craving coldness
- There are many stories of people having fearful visions just before they die

The lower realms

1 The hell realms

1.2 Rebirth in the hell realms



ALL THE FIRES OF THIS HUMAN WORLD PUT
TOGETHER ARE NOTHING COMPARED TO EVEN
A TINY SPARK FROM THE HOT HELL
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

THE FIRST of the eight hot hells is the *hell of being reborn again and again*, where the being is born in a place of red-hot iron mountains and terrible winds. Surrounded by enemies, the being takes up a weapon and fights them, but is cut into tiny pieces. Then its body is reconstituted and the same thing happens again, hundreds of times a day. The lifespan of beings in this hell is billions of years long.

Each succeeding hell is twice the duration with twice as much suffering. In the *black line hell*, the being is laid out on the iron ground and karmically-created guardians cut lines on its body with red-hot wires and then chop it up along those lines. In the *gathered and crushed hell* the being is trapped between two great mountains, usually in the shape of the beings it killed in its previous life. In the *hell of crying* the being finds itself in a burning iron house, without windows or doors, intensely hot and suffocating. After an unimaginable length of time it might escape, only to find itself in the next level of hell, the *hell of great crying*, where there are two burning iron houses, one inside the other.

The last three hells are called the *hot hell*, the *extremely hot hell* and the *inexhaustible hot hell*. In these hells, the beings must endure truly horrible torture, such as being skewered from the anus to the top of the head with a trident and roasted alive. In the inexhaustible hot hell the being has no body as such; it is like the butter of a butter lamp that has melted to become one with the flame. The only way the hell being can be distinguished is by its screams.

- The *hell of being reborn again and again* brings billions of years of suffering
- Each succeeding hell is twice the duration with twice as much suffering
- The *hot hell*, *extremely hot hell* and *inexhaustible hot hell* are the most unbearable

The lower realms

1 The hell realms

1.3 The hot hells

THERE ARE a number of neighboring hells surrounding the eight hot hells, just as suburbs surround a city center. Some beings are born straight into the neighboring hells, but generally these are places that the hell being finds itself in when its time in the hot or cold hells has finished. Having endured the most terrible suffering for an uncountable number of eons, the being finally escapes the main hell, but even then its suffering has still not finished. It must also try to escape these neighboring hells.

Its first obstacle is the *fiery trench*. As the being plunges into the river of lava up to the knees, its legs dissolve with the heat, causing incredibly agony. However, when the being pulls each leg out, the leg re-forms, allowing the hell being to continue, one step at a time, each step causing terrible pain. Finally escaping the lava of the fiery trench, the hell being finds itself in the next neighboring hell, the *putrid swamp*, a quagmire of utterly disgusting filth, like the worst possible septic tank filled with excrement.

In the next surrounding hell, the *plain of swords*, the being has to cross a plain characterized by razor-sharp sword-like thorns that cut it to pieces with every move, causing terrible suffering. The last neighboring hell is the *uncrossable torrent*. This is also called “the water that is oneness with fire” because the texts describe it as water mixed with fire, boiling and bubbling like a pot of boiling oil. The being must cross this boiling river to be free from the neighboring hells, but just stepping into the liquid dissolves its flesh causing agonizing pain. It must suffer like this for an unbelievably long time.

- The neighboring hells surround the hot hells like suburbs surround a city
- A hell being escapes from the agonizing lava of the *fiery trench* into the *putrid swamp*
- After being cut to pieces on the *plain of swords*, its flesh is dissolved by the *uncrossable torrent*

The lower realms

1 *The hell realms*

1.4 *The neighboring hells*



THE COLD OF THE COLD HELL IS SO INTENSE
THAT THE BEINGS THERE ARE ONE WITH THE ICE
MOUNTAIN IN WHICH THEY ARE TRAPPED
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

SIMILAR TO the hot hells, there are eight cold hells, each increasing in duration and suffering from the previous one. They are: the *hell of blisters*; the *hell of bursting blisters*; the *hell of a-choo*; the *moaning hell*; the *clenched-teeth hell*; the *hell of cracking like a blue lotus*; the *hell of cracking like a red lotus*; and the *hell of great cracking like a lotus*.

The body of the hell being is oneness with the cold, and the pain is so intense that the being is unable to move. Pabongka Rinpoche compares it to having our feet nailed to a floorboard. It is completely dark; nothing can be seen. The whole plain is icy ground and the area is surrounded by huge ice mountains. There is always a violent wind blowing, causing terrible snowstorms and sometimes even making the ice mountains crack, creating loud and terrible noises.

Even at the very first level of the cold hells, there is unbelievable, unimaginable suffering of cold. To be trapped in the walk-in freezer of a restaurant for ten minutes would be unbearable, but even the intense pain of that cold could give us no sense of the suffering of a being in the cold hells. Imagine being completely naked and buried in an avalanche of ice on a completely black night with a fierce icy wind howling all around. This is as cold as we could imagine it as a human, but it is not a millionth as cold as the mildest cold hell. And yet this is the experience of countless sentient beings right now—of far more sentient beings than the human and animal realms combined.

- There are eight cold hells, each of increasing duration and suffering
- Surrounded by ice, wind and darkness, the hell being's body is oneness with the cold
- The coldest experience we can imagine is not a millionth as cold as the mildest cold hell

The lower realms

1 The hell realms

1.5 The cold hells

THERE ARE also occasional hells—hellish existences that occur in this world system that can be seen by some people if they have the karma. These can be extreme suffering environments that we know about, such as deserts and swamps, or they can be “occasional” in that the beings don’t constantly experience them. It all depends on individual karma.

Once, a trader named Kotikarna was returning home after collecting jewels from the ocean. As he crossed a desert he saw a burning house with people inside, suffering terribly. When night fell, however, the whole thing changed. The house stopped burning and became a beautiful mansion where the owner enjoyed incredible pleasures with his four female companions. Everything was very luxurious—the finest food, drink, clothes and so forth—and the women were divine goddesses. Then, in the morning, the mansion turned back into the burning house and the women turned into fierce dogs ripping the man apart.

When Kotikarna asked the man why he had to suffer like that, he replied that he had been a butcher and had once asked the arhat Katayana how to maintain moral conduct. Because his occupation was killing animals he could only keep the precept of not killing at night but not during the day. For that reason he suffered terribly by day, but at night he had the most incredible pleasure. Each experience was the result of the different karma he had created.

- Beings in the occasional hells experience intermittent or extreme suffering
- Kotikarna saw a house that was full of suffering by day and enjoyment at night
- Its occupant had been a butcher by day but kept the precept of not killing by night

*The lower realms**1 The hell realms**1.6 The occasional hells*



WE ARE INCREDIBLY CLOSE TO BECOMING A CITIZEN
OF THE HELL REALMS AND NOW IS THE ONLY TIME
WE HAVE THE CHANCE TO TURN THAT AROUND
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

IT IS very easy to become complacent. At this moment we are experiencing great comfort and ease. Our life is pleasant and our troubles are few. Like the lazy feeling we can get on a sunny day when we are picnicking by a river, it seems that life has always been like this and always will be. How foolish we are! We are a breath away from unimaginable torment and yet we deny it because it is unpleasant to think about.

It will be way too late when we have drawn the last breath of this life and the tortures of the hell realm are there for us to see, a living reality that we must now endure. One moment we are lying on a soft bed, and the next moment we are stretched out on a glowing red-hot iron ground, our body burning up in agony. At that time there will be nothing we can do. Only now, while we have the space to change our way of thinking, can we do what is necessary to avoid such a future.

Here is the great tragedy. If we don't do whatever we can to avoid the lower realms now, while we have a human body and so many options, there will be absolutely nothing we can do when we find ourselves there. What to do? If we don't take this opportunity to purify our negative karma now that all the conditions are ripe, there is no way we can do anything about it once it has ripened and we are suffering in the hells.

- It is easy to become complacent while we are experiencing great comfort and ease
- Only now can we change our thinking and avoid the tortures of the hell realm
- We must take this opportunity to purify our negative karma before it's too late

The lower realms

1 The hell realms



THE SECOND of the suffering lower realms is the realm of the hungry ghosts. This realm is created by miserliness and attachment, and is dominated by terrible hunger and thirst. Besides a very few people who have the karma to see hungry ghosts, this realm is invisible to the human world, but the hungry ghosts are there all around us in every moment. We can also see hungry ghost-type situations in our own world. Much of this planet is consumed by famine and drought. Many millions of people spend their entire lives in a desperate battle for survival, always hungry and thirsty, and never able to get sufficient food or drinkable water.

Miserliness is that strong covetousness we can feel for our things, an attachment so strong that we have to keep checking them again and again. Miserliness sees every possession as precious and not to be shared, therefore the miserly person never or rarely does any acts of generosity. They can be extremely rich but still feel they must hoard all their money. People are often incredibly attached to their homes too. These are terrible minds to have in life and very dangerous minds to have at death time because such possessiveness and miserliness will almost definitely be the cause of a hungry ghost existence.

If we die with a jealous or spiteful mind, we can be reborn as a hungry ghost. Using the Dharma to increase our ego and arrogance rather than to subdue our mind is also a cause of being reborn as a hungry ghost. There are stories of meditators who became very adept at their practice without doing anything about their delusions, and who therefore suffered terribly when they died, despite their tantric realizations.

- The realm of the hungry ghosts is dominated by terrible hunger and thirst
- It is created by miserliness and strong attachment, especially at the time of death
- Other causes include dying with a jealous mind and using Dharma to increase our ego

The lower realms

- 2 *The hungry ghost realm*
- 2.1 *Causes of the hungry ghost realm*



ANY FEELING OF HUNGER WE COULD POSSIBLY
HAVE IS NOTHING COMPARED TO WHAT THE HUNGRY
GHOSTS SUFFER EVERY MOMENT OF THEIR LIVES
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

THE PLACE where hungry ghosts (*pretas*) live is simply unimaginable. There is no grass, no trees, no water—nothing! It is completely barren and desolate. Pabongka Rinpoche describes it as being like a red-hot copper pot, burnt by the sun. There are frequent sandstorms in which the hot sharp sand cuts the pretas' sensitive skin like heavy hailstones. In winter the sun is unbearably cold and in summer the moon is unbearably hot.

Without considering any of the other sufferings, just think of this one suffering. Whereas we live in countries that have grass and rivers, where the climate is variable and conducive to life, the hungry ghosts must live in a place that is completely hostile. There is nothing there that can sustain life, and yet they are unable to die. The ground is scorched by the sun and too hot to the touch, and yet the hungry ghosts have to live their whole life in such a place. Even if we only considered the environment of the hungry ghosts, we would do anything to avoid being born there.

With their huge bellies and tiny necks, hungry ghosts are unable to eat or drink, and thus are constantly plagued by hunger and thirst. If we were to undergo such hardships we would die, but the hungry ghosts don't. They are reduced to constantly and desperately searching for food and drink. Utterly exhausted by hunger and thirst, they have to carry their huge weight on tiny limbs and weak muscles, continually terrified of the *yamas* that protect whatever food there is. Unable to die, but also unable to do anything but suffer in these terrible ways, they must endure these sufferings for tens of thousands of years.

- The hungry ghost realm is barren, desolate, and either unbearably hot or unbearably cold
- Although there is nothing to sustain life, the hungry ghosts are unable to die
- Hungry ghosts can't eat or drink and so are constantly plagued by hunger and thirst

The lower realms

2 The hungry ghost realm

2.2 General sufferings: heat, cold, hunger, thirst, exhaustion and fear



A HUNGRY GHOST'S BODY IS A PERFECT
INSTRUMENT OF SUFFERING WITH A HUGE,
DISTENDED BELLY THAT CAN NEVER BE FILLED
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

HUNGRY GHOSTS experience three types of obscurations. The *outer obscurations* are the external factors that stop them satisfying their intense hunger and thirst. These often take the form of karmically-created guardians—fierce yamas—that protect whatever source of food or water there is and chase the weak and terrified hungry ghost away. It might be that a hungry ghost sees a beautiful tree laden with fruit or a wonderful lake in the distance, but after battling with exhaustion for so long, when it approaches, the vision disappears as if it were a mirage, causing terrible frustration. Alternatively, the vision turns into something disgusting. A lake of clear water becomes a putrid quagmire full of blood, pus and animal hairs, making it undrinkable.

The *inner obscurations* are the inability of the hungry ghost to get any sustenance from food, even if it can find it. This is due to its physical condition, which prevents food from entering the stomach. As well as a neck the size of a needle, some hungry ghosts also have goiters, which block the throat even more. If pus oozes from the goiter, they eat that. Then there are the hungry ghosts with two or three knots in their necks, making it impossible to digest anything at all.

The *obscurations of food and drink* refer to the hungry ghost being unable to digest any food or drink that it is able to get into its mouth. The food and drink turn to poison in its stomach, bursting into flame like a lighted match dropped into kerosene. Food or drink can also turn to molten iron when it hits the stomach, causing the hungry ghost unbelievable pain.

- *Outer obscurations* are external factors preventing hungry ghosts from eating or drinking
- *Inner obscurations* are the physical conditions that stop food from entering the stomach
- *Obscurations of food and drink* mean that food and drink turn into poison inside the body

The lower realms

2 The hungry ghost realm

2.3 Particular sufferings: outer and inner obscurations, and obscurations of food and drink

BECAUSE OF their scientific education and understanding of progressive evolution, Westerners often find it difficult to accept that a human being can become like an animal. They think such regression to be impossible. Actually, it's possible.

As I have said before, the sick mind can manifest at the physical level; this is the same thing. It doesn't matter that we look like a human being—our mind can degenerate such that we behave worse than an animal. The mental energy generated in that way can later transform at the physical level and come to occupy an animal body. That's possible. But don't think that this means our human body somehow changes into an animal body. I'm not saying that. When our consciousness separates from our present human body, since it contains the energy of the animal mind, that mental energy transforms into an animal body.

Right action and wrong action are determined by right thought and wrong thought: right wisdom leads to right actions; wrong conceptions lead to wrong actions. If we put the energy of the human body, speech and mind in the right direction, it is so powerful. The problem is that our life has no direction and that's why our energy is fragmented. We must check up on how our life is right now—does it have direction? If not, we're wasting all the energy of our body, speech and mind. Therefore, we need the discriminating knowledge-wisdom to distinguish between right and wrong. In order to develop that, we have to understand our mind and know how positive and negative minds arise. Since all actions arise from the mind, without checking our mind, how can we determine the nature of our actions?

- It's possible for a human being to degenerate so much that they become like an animal
- At death, the consciousness leaves this body and comes to occupy an animal body
- We need to check up on whether we're putting our energy in the right direction

The lower realms

3 The animal realm

3.1 Causes of the animal realm



IF WE LOOK BELOW THE SURFACE OF THE LIFE
OF ANY ANIMAL TO SEE WHAT IT IS REALLY
LIKE WE WILL FIND UNIMAGINABLE SUFFERING
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

ANIMALS ARE ruled by their ignorance. Whether or not hatred or greed are also present, it's ignorance that defines the animal world. Due to their ignorance animals are trapped in fear or aggression, in hunger, cold, heat and all those other torments that make their lives miserable.

No animal is free from the fear of being killed by other animals. This includes the greatest animal, which seems invulnerable because of its size, and the tiniest, which seems safe because of its insignificance. Think of life in the oceans, where each of the billions and billions of fish is only concerned with staying alive, with not being eaten by other fish or, for the majority, with trying to catch smaller fish to eat. Think of life in a desert, where snakes must constantly hunt mice and other small creatures to survive; where hawks and eagles must hunt snakes to survive. Even in the city, this round of killing and being killed is happening continuously. Every wildlife documentary we see emphasizes this major suffering of animals, and we can see it when we observe animals in nature. If we watch them in the correct way, television programs about animals can be as good as Dharma books.

The lives of animals are incredibly cruel and full of suffering. We need to see this to really develop strong compassion for them. We need to realize how we have been just such an animal countless times in the past and how we have the karma to be like that in the future. If we become an animal we will be unable to help ourselves and others. This is why meditating on the suffering of the animal realm is incredibly important.

- Ignorance traps animals in the sufferings of heat, cold, hunger, thirst, exhaustion and fear
- No animal, great or small, is free from the fear of being killed by other animals
- Meditating on the suffering of the animal realm helps us develop strong compassion

The lower realms

3 The animal realm

3.2 General sufferings: heat, cold, hunger, thirst, exhaustion and fear

UNLESS WE practice pure morality, there is no way of telling where we might be reborn or what we might be in our next life, and it is the nature of impermanence that our next life might only be a breath away. What causes are we creating at this very moment? We need to consider this very carefully. We could well be creating the causes to be reborn as an animal. By tomorrow we could be a slimy-skinned frog, hiding in a pond, terrified of being eaten by the birds or foxes all around us. By tomorrow we could be a clam.

When we see a cow or a sheep crowded together with its brothers and sisters in a truck on its way to a slaughterhouse we should think, "That could be me." We have accumulated the karma to be in that position—to be led to the slaughter room and smashed over the head with a hammer, to have our flesh cut away from our carcass and sent to a butcher's shop. When we see meat hanging in a shop window, or even wrapped neatly in plastic in a supermarket, we should think that this could well be our own flesh.

Imagine being an animal like a donkey or horse, having to carry heavy loads every day. Animals plow fields and pull incredibly heavy loads—like the elephants hauling logs or the horses pulling mountains of produce in Asia—or they grind grain, blindfolded and turning a wheel hour after hour, day after day, until they die of exhaustion. No thought is given to their wellbeing let alone their comfort, and when they are used up they are thrown away like a run-down battery.

- Unless we practice morality purely, by tomorrow we might be a frog or a clam
- When we see livestock crowded into a truck we should think "That could be me"
- Animals experience many different sufferings at the hands of human beings

The lower realms

3 The animal realm

3.3 Particular sufferings: overcrowding and abuse by humans

AT PRESENT our minds are clouded by false views and wrong conceptions and therefore are temporarily obscured. We do have the ability to see things clearly and accurately, but instead we are groping in the darkness of attachment, clinging to the hallucinatory world of our senses. However, we should not think that we are caught in negativity permanently. There is not a single being who is suffering permanently, nor is there a single negativity that is permanent. Only as long as our mind is polluted with defilements, with wrong conceptions about reality, shall we suffer.

Suffering is not everlasting; all things are changing. The environment is changing and so is the character of our suffering and dissatisfaction. If negativity were permanent, we too would be permanent. It is exactly the same as if a part of our body, our hand for instance, were permanent, never changing. Then again it would follow that we ourselves would be permanent. How lucky we would be; there would be no reason to worry about dying. We would be the first people on earth to suffer permanently! But such a view is totally illogical, existing solely for the deluded mind. It is not at all in accordance with reality.

There is no human problem that cannot be solved. The idea of permanent negativity and suffering only causes an agitated, guilty feeling, which in turn produces neuroses and other forms of mental illness. A person laboring under such a misconception reaches a hopeless state in which ignorance and delusion become overwhelming. They have deprived life of meaning, and have nothing to fall back upon but despair. However, as we develop deeper understanding, we receive more powerful realizations and thereby become purer inside.

- We should not think that we are permanently caught in negativity
- If suffering were permanent, we would also be permanent, which is illogical
- As we develop deeper understanding we receive realizations and become purer inside

The lower realms

Wrap-up

THE CAUSE for a perfect human rebirth in the future is ethics and generosity, and when we know that and actively work toward such a rebirth, then the lower realms cease to be our next destination and death ceases to be a thing of horror. In short, we need to practice Dharma, and do nothing else but practice Dharma. Effectively, this means never harming others again and, if possible, helping them. On top of this we must do whatever we can to destroy the negative imprints on our mindstream, which can ripen at any moment, whenever the conditions come together. These are the three things we must do; in fact, these three things are a summary of the whole Buddhist path.

The best way to help others and never harm them is to take the various levels of vows that are available to us as Buddhists, thereby not only abstaining from nonvirtue but creating virtue. Even if we are not ready to take the highest vows or are unable keep the ones we have taken purely, we are building a wonderful foundation that will help us transcend all our problems and be able to really help others.

The one solution to all problems, including how to avoid the lower realms, is the good heart. Everything follows from a good heart: the happiness of this life, the happiness of future lives and liberation from samsara and enlightenment. From a good heart comes the ability to help all other sentient beings free themselves from all suffering and eventually attain enlightenment. With a good heart and with all this ahead of us, of course we need have no fear of death and of the lower realms.

- By practicing Dharma, particularly ethics and generosity, we will avoid the lower realms
- Taking vows is the best way to be able to really help others and never harm them
- The one solution to all problems, including rebirth in the lower realms, is the good heart

The lower realms

Wrap-up



MEDITATING ON the suffering of the lower realms is not only vital in giving us the energy to avoid that suffering in our next life, it also destroys the negative mind we have in this life, making it richer and more meaningful. We see our life in a more realistic way.

If we currently lead our small life thinking only of ourselves and our next sense pleasure, meditating on the lower realms shows us clearly how deluded and self-defeating that is. If we are puffed up with pride, thinking we are young, successful, well-liked and beautiful, it shows us clearly what a fantasy that is. More importantly, it shows us how we are exactly the same as every other being in our potential to experience great suffering.

Studying and meditating on the lower realms also gives us the tools to avoid experiencing them. Seeing that attachment, anger and ignorance are the causes that pull us into the lower realms, we naturally turn our life away from indulging in these three poisons. Seeing how close the lower realms are, we use everything we can to avoid them. In this way we discover the wonderful techniques that exist in Buddhism: the methods for developing compassion and bodhicitta—the altruistic thought to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings—and the Vajrayana practice, the lightning-fast way to attain full enlightenment. Until we develop a fierce determination never to experience the suffering of the lower realms, it is very unlikely we will have the necessary energy to engage in such practices to the degree where they can destroy our natural and habitual self-cherishing. This is why we need to study the lower realms.

- Meditating on the suffering of the lower realms makes life richer and more meaningful
- It shows us how we have the same potential for suffering as every other being
- We need to study the lower realms because it will strengthen and inspire our practice

The lower realms

Wrap-up

BUDDHIST REFUGE is a process of turning inward that begins when we discover our own unlimited potential as human beings. This discovery generates tremendous zeal for the development of our own inborn wisdom-energy. Complete, perfect wisdom is buddhahood. Perhaps the word “buddha” conjures up a remote and rather oriental image. But “buddha” is just a word, and it means totally opened mind, an “opened lotus.” When we finally realize our human potential and arrive at this total openness of mind, we become buddhas.

During Buddha Shakyamuni’s lifetime, many people attained profound insight and experienced miraculous bliss as a result of merely seeing him. In spite of his bodily disappearance so long ago, we still benefit from the power of his wisdom and compassion. By cultivating our own latent powers and continuously developing our wisdom, we too can immensely benefit others. However much the world around us changes and our fortunes fluctuate, our inner world can remain stable and balanced when fortified by this profound understanding. Wisdom brings unfailing happiness, unlike those temporal objects of refuge, which bring only tantalizingly brief and inconclusive moments of pleasure.

There are two aspects of refuge: the outer and the inner. Outer refuge means seeking guidance from living buddhas, since we are unable to achieve liberation without a teacher. Buddhas also provide inspiration and are sublime models for us to emulate. When we contemplate the enlightened state, its reflection within our own mind fills us with joyful, radiant energy. This demonstrates that though at present we are not fully enlightened, the seed of buddhahood is contained within each of us. Inner refuge is directed toward this seed of enlightenment, this inner buddha nature. We recognize that, ultimately, we are our own refuge.

- Buddhist refuge is a process of turning inward and discovering our unlimited potential
- Just like Buddha Shakyamuni, we too can become of immense benefit to others
- Initially we take outer refuge, but, ultimately, our inner buddha nature is our refuge

HAVING SEEN that we are suffering and that we need to find a way out of suffering, we seek that way. Using thorough investigation, we can see that we don't personally have the capacity to save ourselves from suffering. We are too deluded to find our own way out of the maze of delusions. We are blind and looking for a road to safety, not even sure what safety is. We cannot even solve the mundane problems that fill our daily life, let alone save ourselves from the suffering of the lower realms that threatens to engulf us after we die. We need help from somebody who will not let us down.

When we investigate other philosophies and methods, we see that many have good ideas and most can help us in some way for a period of time, but none has the power to release us from all suffering forever. Therefore our search must be for a method that will take us out of all suffering: a method that will never let us down, will never cheat us and will never mislead us in the slightest way. It must be infallible. When we find such a method, then we need to really see if it can do what it promises. Then we will have complete faith in it.

What will save us from the lower realms? What will save us from the suffering that lies at the heart of the whole of samsara? When we analyze this well, we see that only the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha can do that. We then trust in the help they can give, rely on it and have devotion to this way alone.

- We don't personally have the capacity to save ourselves from suffering
- We need to find an infallible method that will never let us down, cheat or mislead us
- When we analyze well, we see that only the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha can save us



THE STRENGTH of our refuge depends on the strength of our aversion to suffering and our understanding of the qualities of the objects of refuge. Therefore, we should check up very carefully on the strength of these two causes of refuge in our mindstream. If one is weak or missing, we should study and meditate on that subject and ensure that we strengthen it as much as we are able.

If the first cause—our fear of samsaric suffering—is not strong enough to enable us to break free from our destructive habits, then we should study more about suffering: about the lower realms and the likelihood of us ending up there, about the eight and six types of human suffering, and about the three types of suffering that pervade the whole of samsara. If we could see our situation clearly, we would be able to think of nothing except practicing Dharma. Whenever we feel the slightest reluctance to practice, we need to understand that this is because we are still blocked, either through denying our own suffering or through failing to see how the Three Rare Sublime Ones are reliable objects of refuge.

These two causes of refuge, fear and devotion, are our route out of samsara, and are therefore considered the route to individual liberation. However, Mahayana refuge requires a third cause—compassion. In Mahayana Buddhism, the emphasis is not on getting out samsara in order to be free from suffering for our own sake, but to attain full and complete enlightenment so that we are in the best position to help all other beings out of suffering. With compassion as the third cause of taking refuge, we then rely wholeheartedly on the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and seek their guidance.

- We must carefully check the strength of the two causes of refuge in our mindstream
- We need to understand both suffering and the qualities of the objects of refuge
- To practice Mahayana Buddhism we also need a third cause of refuge: compassion

Refuge

1 The causes on which taking refuge depends



WE ALREADY take refuge in food, in keeping warm, in houses, clothes and chocolate. Already, we take refuge in these things in order to be happy. So why should we take refuge again, at this time? What is so special? We should understand clean-clear that taking refuge in chocolate or ice cream is not sufficient, it doesn't bring everlasting realizations.

The refuge that does bring everlasting realizations is an inner experience, an inner understanding, and confidence in the Buddhadharma. We take refuge in the Dharma by understanding the universal nature of ourselves and all beings. This is the way to completely free ourselves. This is the way to elevate ourselves from all miserable situations. When we understand this there is no reason to be unhappy, to crave ice cream, is there? Anyway, we know—when we buy ice cream and eat it, it is not sufficient, is it? We must think about our own experience, what we take refuge in when we are unhappy. When we're miserable, we try to do incredible things! We try going to the cinema, going dancing—anything to make us forget our unhappiness. The point is, whatever we take refuge in doesn't give us a real solution: we have to understand this clean-clear.

From now on, from today, we should understand that ice cream and dancing are superficial, momentary refuges and that practicing Dharma is the everlasting refuge that leads to everlasting happiness. Dharma is the way, Buddha the leader, and Sangha the dear friends who take care of us, help us understand the Dharma and energize us through their good behavior. The other ways we try to take refuge, the samsaric ways, do not fundamentally change the problem.

- Taking refuge in worldly pleasures such as chocolate and ice cream is not sufficient
- The way to free ourselves from all miserable situations is to take refuge in the Dharma
- Practicing Dharma is the everlasting refuge that leads to everlasting happiness

Refuge

2 Identifying what to take refuge in

To come to rely on the Buddha, we must investigate and see his incredible qualities. There are many ways to do this. The stories about his life, both before and after his enlightenment, are a great source of inspiration.

In the ancient Indian state of Magadha, King Ajatashatru was jealous of the Buddha's power and the great following he was attracting. So he set loose a crazy, untamed elephant to crush the Buddha while he and his Sangha were on their daily alms round. When the elephant charged toward the Buddha, his arhat followers were completely terrified and used their psychic powers to fly into the sky to escape. Only the Buddha remained placidly where he was, on the road. Before the elephant reached him, the Buddha spread out his hands, and five snow lions appeared, transforming into a circle of fire that protected him. Subdued by the power of the Buddha, the elephant stopped and knelt before him. The Buddha's great love and compassion completely tamed the wild animal. Afterwards the elephant was completely devoted to the Buddha and followed him everywhere.

There are many other stories like this in the scriptures that show how Guru Shakyamuni Buddha was completely free from all fear and suffering. By destroying both his gross and subtle delusions he freed himself from the two great fears, and therefore he is a completely trustworthy guide. We can take refuge in the Buddha without the slightest fear that he lacks the power to lead us out of all suffering and its causes.

- To rely on the Buddha, we must investigate and see his incredible qualities
- In Magadha the Buddha tamed a crazy wild elephant let loose by King Ajatashatru
- The Buddha is a trustworthy guide who is completely free from all fear and suffering

Refuge

2 Identifying what to take refuge in

2.1 Why the Three Rare Sublime Ones are fitting objects of refuge

2.1.1 The Buddha is free from suffering and fear

THE SECOND reason that Guru Shakyamuni Buddha is a trustworthy refuge is because he is extremely wise in guiding all sentient beings from suffering, no matter what the mental capacity or disposition of those beings is. If the Buddha were not completely skillful in guiding all beings, it would be impossible for him to lead them to enlightenment. He would be like an armless mother unable to help her beloved son who had been swept away by a river.

One of the most famous stories in Buddhism is that of the murderer Angulimala, who went around the countryside terrifying everyone by killing people. Having cut off their fingers, he made a mala from the little finger of the left hand of each victim (Angulimala means “mala of fingers.”) Angulimala had murdered 999 people and was about to murder his thousandth, his own mother, when he saw the Buddha walking along the road. The Buddha called out and Angulimala ran toward him. However due to the psychic powers of the Buddha, no matter how fast the murderer ran—despite the fact that the Buddha seemed to be walking very slowly—he could not catch up. In that way, the Buddha was able to subdue Angulimala’s mind.

Guru Shakyamuni understands exactly the right time to instruct a person and exactly how to most skillfully help. He can manifest as a beggar or as a mangy dog; as a warrior, a butcher or a prostitute; as a judge or politician. He can give material things, help or advice. He can teach in simple parables or deliver the most esoteric philosophy. The Buddha knows exactly what will aid each person in their quest for liberation or enlightenment.

- The Buddha has the wisdom and skill to guide every kind of being out of suffering
- The story of Angulimala demonstrates the skill and psychic powers of the Buddha
- The Buddha understands exactly when and how to help each person on the path

Refuge

2 Identifying what to take refuge in

2.1 Why the Three Rare Sublime Ones are fitting objects of refuge

2.1.2 The Buddha is skilled in guiding sentient beings

THE THIRD reason that the Buddha is a trustworthy refuge is that he feels compassion for all sentient beings without exception. He has no sense of partiality at all, favoring one sentient being over another. He is completely without discrimination in his wish to help others, whether they are his immediate family or a sworn enemy determined to kill him.

Devadatta was the Buddha's cousin and always felt intensely jealous of the Buddha; on different occasions he actually tried to kill him. The Buddha's physician had given the Buddha some medicine that was incredibly powerful. Devadatta heard that if anybody less advanced than the Buddha took this medicine, it would be too powerful for them and they would die. This incensed Devadatta, who determined that he would prove he was as powerful as the Buddha by also taking the medicine. He swallowed the medicine and, as the doctor predicted, became gravely ill. It was obvious that his life was in terrible danger. When the Buddha heard this, he went to Devadatta, put his hand on Devadatta's forehead and said that if he had equal love and compassion for Devadatta as for his own beloved son, Rahula, then Devadatta should get better. Just by the power of the truth of these words alone, Devadatta was immediately cured.

If the Buddha did not show unbiased compassion equally for all, he couldn't guide all sentient beings; there would always be some that he didn't guide because of his partiality. But because he is completely released from all delusion, there is not a single sentient being that he doesn't understand and feel compassion for; he feels equal compassion for all.

- The Buddha is a trustworthy guide because he is completely without discrimination
- Challenged by the jealous Devadatta, the Buddha showed only love and compassion
- The Buddha feels equal compassion for every sentient being without exception

Refuge

2 Identifying what to take refuge in

2.1 Why the Three Rare Sublime Ones are fitting objects of refuge

2.1.3 The Buddha has equal compassion for all sentient beings



THE FOURTH reason that the Buddha is a trustworthy refuge is that he works for the benefit of all sentient beings equally, regardless of the help or harm he has received from them. There is no need from our side to placate him or ingratiate ourselves with him, to win his favors or show ourselves worthy of his help. We can totally trust in his help, whether or not we have taken refuge in him. The depth of our refuge depends on the depth of our trust in the Buddha, not in his deeming to help us for some predetermined reason, such as the number of prostrations we have made to him.

Many of the *Jataka Tales*, stories of the Buddha's previous lives, show us how important it is to have impartial compassion, compassion not just for those we like but for all sentient beings. For instance, once when he was a monkey, Shakyamuni Buddha rescued an evil man from a well, only to be abused.

This is exactly opposite to the way we ordinary people behave. We might be able to generate some compassion, but it is invariably for those who we feel deserve our compassion, such as the poor and the weak. Others we consider deserving of our anger and contempt, such as violent criminals or rich people who exploit the poor. We also discriminate helpers from harmers. If anybody has harmed us in any way, then they are an enemy and can never expect any compassion from us, no matter how unhappy they are. If Guru Shakyamuni Buddha were like that, then he would only guide some and not others, but he is not like that at all. The Buddha doesn't discriminate between close and distant, and feels equal compassion for all beings.

- The Buddha works to benefit all beings, whether or not they have helped or harmed him
- Many of the *Jataka Tales* demonstrate the importance of impartial compassion
- By contrast, we only have compassion for the people we consider deserving of it

Refuge

2 Identifying what to take refuge in

2.1 Why the Three Rare Sublime Ones are fitting objects of refuge

2.1.4 The Buddha works for all sentient beings equally

MANY PEOPLE do not understand that it's only the light of wisdom that can elevate them into liberation, nirvana, salvation or whatever we want to call it, so they take refuge in material things instead. They also engage in mistaken practices. In Nepal, many people believe that their religion says they have to sacrifice animals to the gods, so at certain times they can kill as many as 100,000 sentient beings in a day. The streets run with blood. I'm not criticizing other religions, merely trying to point out reality—if we engage in such practices we're leading the wrong kind of life.

It's so worthwhile to take refuge in that which can truly liberate us. Otherwise we'll see people taking refuge in the sun, the moon or something else up in the sky. People look up at the sky and, thinking God is up there, fold their hands and cry, "Please help me." They look up pleading for God's help, yet down here on earth engage in ridiculous actions, somehow expecting him to reach down and say, "My child, come to me." God can't guide us that way. It's impossible.

We should be open and honest with ourselves and admit that for countless lives, and even for the whole of this one, we have been taking refuge in the external world. What has been the result? Confusion and more attachment. Who has the power to release us from all this? It's only the Buddha and his knowledge-wisdom. Through his profound wisdom, he's the only one who can show us the reality of who and what we are.

- Many people take refuge in material things and engage in mistaken practices
- We should only take refuge in that which can truly liberate us
- Only the Buddha can release us from our habit of taking refuge in the external world



WHEN WE think of the historical Buddha's body, it is natural to think of it as a normal human body. The pictures we see of the Buddha after his enlightenment show a monk in India on a throne or among the trees with his Sangha. He has a beautiful body, and perhaps an aura around his head, but it is still a very human body. However, this is just one manifestation of the body of a buddha. Every pore and hair of a buddha's body has the power to manifest in different ways to benefit numberless sentient beings, and each manifestation can have the function of the holy body, the holy speech and the holy mind.

We can study the symbolism of all the different aspects of a buddha's body, but we don't need to know about this to receive its benefits. We are comforted just by seeing the crown protrusion, the long ears and the wide, gentle eyes. We are naturally inspired when we begin to understand how these symbolize the incredible qualities of a buddha. We want to behave in a way that will lead us also to develop these qualities and gain the body of a buddha. Just the sight of a buddha image can be the trigger for us to set out on the journey to enlightenment.

Whoever sees a buddha is subdued. Whenever they stand or sit, even if they are at somebody's side or behind them, it feels to that person as if they are looking straight at them. Just by seeing a buddha, people become very gentle and thoughts of nonvirtue drop away. Devotion just naturally arises. Because of the power of the object, just seeing a buddha is unbelievable purification.

- A buddha doesn't have a normal human body: every pore manifests in numberless ways
- Every aspect of a buddha's body is symbolic and deeply comforting and inspiring
- Whoever sees a buddha is subdued and purified, and devotion naturally arises

Refuge

3 The criteria for taking refuge

3.1 Knowing the good qualities of our refuge

3.1.1 The good qualities of the Buddha

3.1.1.1 The good qualities of the Buddha's body

ENLIGHTENED BEINGS understand the way people think and can take the measure of their superstitious mind. They can spontaneously adjust their approach to each person's limitations and make sure that that person is ready before showing them their individual path. Their unobstructed vision embraces all existent phenomena, including the subtlest workings of our mind, and thus they can teach us accordingly.

When enlightened beings do give teachings, the strength of their realizations lends a special power to everything they say or do. Even one word can satisfy the needs of many different beings. Ordinary people are limited in what they can convey with words; their speech seldom brings a sense of fulfillment. But an enlightened being's speech is different. Irrespective of the subject matter, each listener receives exactly what they need.

Ordinarily, if we feel that someone is a good speaker, we might praise them by saying, "What a powerful lecture they gave!" But from a Buddhist point of view, the true power of speech is not to be found in speech itself. Behind the words, within the mind of the speaker, there must be the living experience of luminous, penetrating wisdom. This wisdom gives a buddha's speech its power. Such power has nothing to do with an ordinary person's eloquence. It is solely a matter of inner realization. Since a buddha is one whose realizations are complete, their speech has the power to affect each listener in a profound and deeply personal way. Not only that, but an enlightened being can arouse understanding without having to use any words at all.

- An enlightened being understands the way people think and teaches accordingly
- No matter what the subject is, each listener receives exactly what they need
- Behind the words of a buddha is the living experience of luminous, penetrating wisdom

Refuge

3 The criteria for taking refuge

3.1 Knowing the good qualities of our refuge

3.1.1 The good qualities of the Buddha

3.1.1.2 The good qualities of the Buddha's speech

MANY PEOPLE have only a superficial understanding of what the Buddha is. They read one book after another but never connect the Buddha with themselves, so it's basically useless. If we can relate to the Buddha in a personal way that brings him close to us or even unifies him with us, that's very practical. I'm not going to discuss in philosophical terms what the Buddha is, which takes time and may not be beneficial; explaining a new word, unfamiliar terminology, can be difficult. Practically speaking, however, buddha means omnipresent *wisdom*, wisdom that pervades all universal reality. There is no dark shadow of ignorance in the Buddha's wisdom.

Then we talk about the *power* of the Buddha: the perfect power to lead all sentient beings into the perfect state, not the power to kill all sentient beings. The enlightened power Buddhism talks about is that which controls, or conquers, the ego, which is the most difficult thing. We don't care if somebody can fly—even birds can do that; what we care about is if somebody has the power to control their own ego.

Finally, there's the Buddha's universal *compassion* and love. Our compassion is very partial—we have compassion for our partner, our relatives, our parents; our compassion is limited but the Buddha's compassion is limitless and embraces all living beings.

- The Buddha's wisdom is omnipresent and pervades all universal reality
- The Buddha has perfect power to lead all sentient beings into the perfect state
- The Buddha has limitless, impartial compassion for all sentient beings everywhere

Refuge

3 The criteria for taking refuge

3.1 Knowing the good qualities of our refuge

3.1.1 The good qualities of the Buddha

3.1.1.3 The good qualities of the Buddha's mind

THE BUDDHA manifests in many ways, both animate and inanimate, in order to benefit us. Where there is need for a bridge or a boat, the Buddha manifests as these things. If there is need for rain, the Buddha's holy mind takes the form of a rain cloud. Whenever a virtuous thought arises in our mind, this is the action of the Buddha's holy mind.

The Dharma books that we can easily obtain in many different languages are manifestations of the Buddha. Many people come to the Dharma after first reading a basic book on Buddhism. Having become interested, they seek a guru who can teach meditations on the path. Before, they didn't have any devotion to the teachings—their mind was like a barren desert—but through reading the books, they change, their devotion grows and their mind is subdued. This is how the holy speech of the Buddha manifests through letters and pages in the holy texts. The Buddha can also manifest as a statue or a *thangka*. Just seeing a holy object ripens the mind and is a very skillful way of leading beings to the Dharma.

Effortlessly, the Buddha inspires us to become a buddha too. This can be compared to how Indra, the king of the god realm, inspired the other gods. When Indra walked past, the other gods saw his reflection in the lapis lazuli floor, were awed with his beauty and wanted to be like him. They were inspired by his reflection even though he had no intention to inspire them. In the same way, we are inspired by images of the Buddha without any conscious intention on his part.

- The Buddha manifests in many ways, both animate and inanimate, to benefit us
- Dharma books, statues and thangkas are all manifestations to ripen and subdue our mind
- Effortlessly the Buddha inspires us to become a buddha too

Refuge

3 The criteria for taking refuge

3.1 Knowing the good qualities of our refuge

3.1.1 The good qualities of the Buddha

3.1.1.4 The good qualities of the Buddha's enlightened activities

DHARMA is a Sanskrit word that means not just the teachings of the Buddha, but anything that leads us from suffering to happiness. The relative Dharma jewel is the 84,000 teachings shown by Guru Shakyamuni Buddha that explain the different levels of cessation, the five paths, the ten grounds and so forth. These are divided into three “baskets”: the Vinaya (morality and monastic discipline), the Abhidharma (philosophy), and the Sutra (all the other teachings that the Buddha gave).

By understanding the lamrim we can see how everything the Buddha ever taught fits within its topics and that each topic is designed to lead us closer and closer to liberation and enlightenment. Until we can deeply understand this, it might seem that some things that the Buddha taught lack relevance, that they belong to an ancient culture that is no longer applicable to us in the twenty-first century. This is not at all true. Every word is completely relevant.

Understanding the lamrim enables us to relate to every word the Buddha taught because we can see where it fits in our journey to enlightenment. Then, no matter how many different teachings we hear, nothing will confuse us. Of course, because of our propensities, we may experience more affinity for one section of the Dharma than another. Perhaps we feel that compassion is all we need and that while a rational understanding of reality is interesting, it is not for us. To develop as much compassion as we can is obviously excellent, but ignoring ultimate reality is a big mistake. The Dharma is like a recipe for the most delicious cake—we might already have some flour and sugar, but we need many other ingredients to make the cake complete.

- The relative Dharma is the 84,000 teachings shown by Guru Shakyamuni Buddha
- Everything the Buddha taught fits into the framework of the lamrim
- The Dharma is like a delicious recipe in which every ingredient plays its part

Refuge

3 The criteria for taking refuge

3.1 Knowing the good qualities of our refuge

3.1.2 The good qualities of the Dharma



SANGHA is very easy to understand. Gathered here are old students and new. When it's time for discussion, new students can sometimes feel, "Oh, this subject is impossible to understand." Then, when the older students explain it, they think, "Oh, OK, they understand it; I guess I can too." It helps so much. So, we can consider all our Dharma friends to be our Sangha.

However, technically speaking, there are actually two meanings of Sangha: absolute Sangha and relative Sangha. Perhaps we can say we are all relative Sangha, trying to help each other. It doesn't even have to be verbal help. Just trying to be nice, giving others a good visualization and vibrating positive energy can be helpful. Absolute Sangha are those who have realized ultimate reality, emptiness.

In some Buddhist countries they think that Sangha are those who wear red or yellow monastic robes. They are symbolic; they are not true Sangha. True Sangha can look like anything. If long-haired hippies with bushy beards have realized emptiness, they can be Sangha.

- Our Dharma friends are relative Sangha because they help us understand the teachings
- Absolute Sangha are those who have realized ultimate reality, emptiness
- True Sangha is anyone who understands reality, whether or not they wear robes

Refuge

3 The criteria for taking refuge

3.1 Knowing the good qualities of our refuge

3.1.3 The good qualities of the Sangha



THE HISTORICAL Buddha is the one in whom we take refuge and is thus the cause of our own enlightenment—the causal refuge. This is true of all the buddhas, not just Shakyamuni Buddha. The end result, the resultant refuge, is our own buddhahood, and therefore the absolute Buddha is the omniscient mind—itself, ours or anybody else's. This is the wisdom or truth body, the *dharmakaya*, one of the holy bodies of a buddha.

The absolute Dharma is the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness, which is the true path that eliminates the disturbing-thought obscurations. Morality is not enough, concentration is not enough, and neither is a conceptual understanding of emptiness. We must have a direct realization of emptiness. This is the actual refuge that saves us from the suffering of samsara. When we have this direct realization of emptiness, we have attained the absolute Dharma.

We have no way of taking teachings directly from the Buddha but we have the great yogis and pandits who followed him. They realized liberation and enlightenment using his methods and are therefore the ones we can rely on, our Sangha refuge. Those with high realizations are the absolute Sangha, and those who have yet to attain realizations but who are on the path are the conventional Sangha. Ultimately, what will save us is our own inner Buddha, Dharma and Sangha—our buddha nature and the realizations we have. However, at present we need the help of the external Buddha, Dharma and Sangha—the Buddha, his teachings and the spiritual community, those who can share the teachings with us and inspire us by their example.

- The absolute Buddha is the omniscient mind—itself, ours or anybody else's
- The absolute Dharma refuge is the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness
- The absolute Sangha are those who have realized emptiness

Refuge

3 The criteria for taking refuge

3.2 Knowing the differences between the Three Rare Sublime Ones



THE THREE objects of refuge are Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Taking refuge in the Buddha involves accepting the guidance of an enlightened being as the only remedy for the confusion and dissatisfaction of our present life. If we are convinced that we are beyond hope and incapable of change, or if we think we are already perfect, then of course there is obviously no reason to take refuge. But if we honestly examine our mind, our way of life and the pattern of our relationships, we can clearly recognize our own spiritual sickness. The enlightened being we turn to at this point is, in effect, the doctor who diagnoses our ailments and restores us to perfect health.

The medicine prescribed by the Buddha is the Dharma. Dharma is wisdom: the wisdom that understands our own true nature and reveals our own latent power of self-liberation. Taking refuge in Dharma means using that wisdom *now*. This will restore our hitherto obscured sense of human dignity and make us feel that we can, after all, do something positive about ourselves. Those who take deep refuge never feel lost or desperate. Refuge frees us from such abject mental states. As our self-respect and confidence increase, our relationships with others improve. Having discovered our own inner strength, we also recognize and respect the buddha nature in others.

Sangha consists of those who are endowed with wisdom. They are like the nurses and friends who help us to recuperate from an illness. Sangha is not only those who wear red or yellow robes but also those friends who influence us beneficially. These spiritual friends energize and inspire us and are therefore to be clearly distinguished from ordinary friends, who only hold us back.

- The Buddha is like a doctor who diagnoses our ailments and restores us to perfect health
- The medicine is the Dharma, which is the wisdom understanding our true nature
- Sangha are like the nurses and friends who help us to recuperate from an illness

Refuge

3 The criteria for taking refuge

3.3 Taking refuge according to our beliefs

IT'S IMPORTANT to take refuge strongly from our heart. If we have a two-pointed mind, taking refuge in the Buddha but also taking refuge in a wrong founder who shows the wrong path, we can never succeed. We need to differentiate between right and wrong paths, because followers of a wrong path have no way to transcend suffering.

Just as a blind person can't guide us along a path, those who are not free from samsara through having gained true cessation of suffering by actualizing the true path cannot free us from samsara. Only those with an omniscient mind can do that. Those who have fully realized the nature of reality will never mislead us; those who have fully realized compassion will never cheat us. They have the perfect power to reveal the method that best suits the different levels of mind of sentient beings. Whoever has these qualities is a worthy object of refuge, whether or not they are called a buddha. By taking refuge in such beings we can be guided to the peerless state of perfect peace, to full enlightenment.

Therefore, it is crucial that we analyze who is a worthy object of refuge, who is someone we can rely on fully to lead us on the right spiritual path. If we follow a wrong founder or a wrong guide, not only do we waste this precious human rebirth but we also fail to gain happiness in all our future lives, liberation from samsara or enlightenment.

- We need to take refuge in the right founder and the right path
- Someone who is not free from samsara cannot lead us to enlightenment
- It is crucial to analyze who is a worthy and reliable object of refuge

Refuge

3 The criteria for taking refuge

3.4 Taking refuge and not asserting another religion

THE REAL significance of taking refuge in Dharma wisdom is that it is the entrance to the path to enlightenment. That is why, traditionally, people in Buddhist countries take refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha every day. But Western people don't need to copy this, going to the temple every day, taking refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha without concentration. We don't need to follow the customs of those countries. What we need to do is to recognize what brings us a liberated joyful life. Instead of relying on and taking refuge in the beach, movies or popcorn, we should understand in our hearts that the liberated joyful life does not depend on those conditions, those worldly phenomena.

We are not trying to make Westerners imitate the traditional aspects of Buddhist culture. We should understand that taking refuge is a state of mind. It doesn't matter whether we are in a plane, a subway, a train, a bathroom or wherever. What we need to recognize is our buddha potential and rely on that inner wisdom to stop the problems of everyday life. We should understand that we can deal with problems through meditation, intellectual thought and enacting the six perfections. From my point of view, that kind of thing is good enough; if we are really taking refuge we don't even need to say the word "Buddha."

The important thing in taking refuge is to understand that by doing so we can solve the problems of everyday life by relying on the Buddha's wisdom, which we can also call our own activated wisdom. By relying on the Buddha's wisdom with confidence and trust we can liberate ourselves from suffering and confusion.

- Taking refuge in Dharma wisdom is the entrance to the path to enlightenment
- If we are really taking refuge we don't even need to say the word "Buddha"
- We rely on the Buddha's wisdom—and our own—to liberate us from suffering

Refuge

4 The benefits of taking refuge

4.1 We become Buddhist



BEFORE WE can take any Buddhist vows, we must have refuge. We can still refrain from killing, stealing and so forth without having taken refuge, but that same restraint done within a vow is much more powerful, and refuge is the gateway that leads to all this.

We take refuge because we are afraid of the consequences of our negative karma and see that we need to rely on the Three Rare Sublime Ones to guide us. These are exactly the same reasons we take vows. Our vows protect us from all our fears—of the lower realms, the whole of samsara and lower nirvana, and the unbearable fear for the suffering of all other sentient beings—and allow us to benefit from the wisdom of the enlightened beings. In that way, refuge qualifies us to take and uphold all our vows.

Even if we do no other practice at all but just live purely in the vows, it makes our life very rich and very meaningful. It means that, depending on the number of vows we have taken, we have stopped giving those harms to all other sentient beings, and therefore no sentient being will ever receive direct or indirect harm from us in that way. This is something very special. By living in the vows, we give that much peace to all sentient beings. For example, if we have vowed not to kill, all sentient beings have the great freedom of not being killed by us; if we have vowed not to steal, no sentient being need fear our stealing anything from them. In this way, we become a source of peace for all sentient beings.

- Refuge is the gateway to taking vows, which make our virtuous actions more powerful
- Both refuge and vows protect us from fear and enable us to follow the teachings
- Through living purely in our vows, we become a source of peace for all sentient beings

Refuge

4 The benefits of taking refuge

4.2 We become a candidate for all vows

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WITH REFUGE, EVERYTHING BECOMES DHARMA
AND HENCE A CAUSE OF PURIFICATION
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

BECAUSE WE have taken refuge, in every moment we are able to accumulate merit as vast as the sky by doing actions such as making offerings, doing prostrations and circumambulating holy objects. Such actions purify eons of negative karma, thus saving us from rebirth in the three lower realms of the hell beings, hungry ghosts and animals. It is said that circumambulating a stupa just once liberates us from the suffering of the eight hot hells, and reciting the name mantra of Guru Shakyamuni Buddha purifies us of 80,000 eons of negative karma.

All the karmic imprints left on our mindstream from the negative actions we have committed in all our previous lives are diminished and even eliminated by taking refuge. King Ajatashatru killed his father, King Bimbisara, who had become an arhat, which means that the son had committed two of the five immediate negativities: killing his father and killing an arhat. However, he deeply regretted the act and, by taking strong refuge in the Three Rare Sublime Ones and confessing this heavy negative karma, he was able to purify it completely. It was the same with Angulimala, whose refuge in the Buddha turned his life around and enabled him to quickly purify his heinous crimes and become an arhat.

By meditating on the qualities of the Three Rare Sublime Ones and the benefits of refuge prior to doing any purification practice, our practice becomes much more powerful. Simply through having some knowledge of Guru Shakyamuni Buddha and thereby developing devotion to him, we are incredibly fortunate in being able to purify much more easily than someone who has no knowledge of the Buddha.

- By taking refuge we accumulate merit and purify eons of negative karma
- King Ajatashatru purified the murder of his father, an arhat, by taking strong refuge
- Even a little knowledge of and devotion to the Buddha makes it much easier to purify

Refuge

4 The benefits of taking refuge

4.3 We purify previous negative karma



IF THE merit we create by taking refuge were to take physical form, the whole of space would be unable to accommodate it; the whole universe would be too small. In fact, all the countless universes would be too small. Here, we are not talking about the benefits of the refuge vow we take with a lama but the everyday refuge we hold in our heart—our reliance on the Buddha, his teachings and the spiritual community.

With refuge, we create merit twenty-four hours a day. For example, to grow wheat we need to rely on the seasons, to plant and harvest at the right time, and we need a lot of luck for all the conditions to come together, such as the right amount of rain and sun and the condition of the soil. But with refuge, we can create merit any time we want; it's all up to us, and we don't need luck for the conditions to be right. Meditating, studying, prostrating and making offerings—any practice we do with a mind of refuge—will definitely bring a huge positive result. Unlike a regular crop, our harvest will be incalculable; it will be inconceivable happiness.

As we create more merit it becomes increasingly easy to act virtuously and thus it becomes increasingly easy to create even more merit. Our understanding becomes deeper and our delusions diminish. Therefore, of all the help we can receive in this life—from our parents and our community or from the achievements we gain in our studies and our career—the most beneficial and important help comes from the refuge we take.

- We create inconceivable merit simply through the everyday refuge we hold in our heart
- Any practice we do with a mind of refuge will definitely bring a huge positive result
- Taking refuge is the most helpful, beneficial and important thing we can do in this life

Refuge

4 The benefits of taking refuge

4.4 We will easily accumulate a huge amount of merit

OUR REFUGE is a strong protection from harm, whether that harm is inflicted on us by malevolent human beings or by animals, spirits and the like. There are many stories that illustrate this.

In ancient India there was a king who punished criminals by putting them in a cemetery inhabited by vicious spirits that ate people. It was believed that nobody could escape them. Once, a criminal was sentenced to remain there overnight and he fully expected it to be his last. But then he noticed a scrap of red cloth on the ground, picked it up, placed it on the crown of his head and took refuge in it as if it were a monk's robes. Terrified, he spent the whole night praying to the Three Rare Sublime Ones to save him. Nothing untoward happened and the next morning, having served his sentence, he returned home a free man.

When the Tibetans first fled Tibet after the Chinese invasion, the refugee camps they stayed at were very rough. Some were in the middle of a jungle in which there were many wild animals, including elephants, tigers and cobras. The monks had to clear the jungle to build the huts they were to sleep in, and many were terrified whenever they went there. So whenever the monks saw a dangerous animal they would remember His Holiness the Dalai Lama and take refuge in their hearts. In every case the animal didn't bother them.

- Our refuge is a strong protection from being harmed by humans, animals or spirits
- A criminal once saved himself by taking refuge in a scrap of red cloth
- Tibetan refugees took refuge to protect themselves from wild animals in the jungle

Refuge

4 The benefits of taking refuge

4.5 We are protected from the harmful actions of humans and non-humans

AT THE time of death, simply having strong refuge in and remembering somebody like the Buddha or one of the other buddhas, such as Amitabha or Chenrezig, will save us from rebirth in the lower realms. Similarly, if when we're dying we can just remember a Dharma text, such as the *Heart Sutra* or the *Vajra Cutter Sutra*, or a mantra, that too can save us from the lower realms. And taking refuge in a Sangha member, a person with attainments in whom we have strong faith, can also save us from the lower realms. In other words, simply having refuge in even one of the Three Rare Sublime Ones will make it impossible for us to suffer a lower rebirth. In this way, the Three Rare Sublime Ones are extremely powerful.

There are many stories of people who have averted a terrible death and rebirth by remembering a buddha such as Chenrezig or Tara. Even though those people might have had the karma to be reborn in the lower realms, their strong faith in a buddha enabled them to avoid a miserable rebirth.

Whether we are happy or miserable, we need to train our mind right now. If we wait until the time of death it will be too late; it will be very difficult to remember anything. In order to have faith in the Buddha at that crucial time we have to train in refuge now; we can't just hope that mind of refuge will arise by itself as we die.

- At the time of death, strong refuge will save us from rebirth in the lower realms
- Many people have averted a terrible death and rebirth by remembering the buddhas
- We must train our mind in refuge now: at the time of death it will be too late

Refuge

4 The benefits of taking refuge

4.6 We will not fall to the lower realms



BY HAVING refuge in our heart, we instantly create extensive merit, and therefore positive, happy results manifest effortlessly and continually. Every action we do becomes Dharma; it becomes an offering to the Three Rare Sublime Ones. Everything we do creates unbelievable merit.

Before the monastery was built at Lawudo, I had the idea of benefiting the people there because they were extremely weighed down with ignorance. They didn't even have devotion, let alone an understanding of the Dharma. By generating faith in the Three Rare Sublime Ones they were able to start and then complete the new center, which has been an incredible help to them. Seeing the effectiveness of refuge, they have managed to turn their lives around and now have the opportunity to receive teachings and study Dharma. Teachings are pouring down upon them like nectar to cure the sufferings of samsara.

At present we rely on mundane methods to stave off misfortune and bring success, but at best such methods can have only limited success. Patients with life-threatening and seemingly incurable illnesses have taken refuge in the Buddha, Kuan Yin or another deity and have been completely cured. I have heard from many students whose disease has been diagnosed as incurable how they have managed to cure themselves with Dharma practice, such as purification or mantras based in refuge. Refuge is the universal medicine. We can use refuge for anything. Just as wheat can be used to make bread, pizza, pancakes, pies and biscuits, refuge is the basic ingredient to bring whatever success we want: healing ourselves, success for our Dharma center, harmony in our family and so forth.

- Refuge creates extensive merit, so positive results manifest effortlessly and continually
- There are many examples of people achieving their aims through taking refuge
- Refuge is the universal medicine and the basic ingredient for whatever success we want

Refuge

4 The benefits of taking refuge

4.7 We achieve all our temporary and long-term aims



BY TAKING refuge we assure ourselves of every success we wish for, and the greatest success possible is the ultimate state of full enlightenment. Until we reach that state, we will always have some stain of delusion, no matter how slight. The teachings describe being “released from bondage,” which means being freed from what binds us to suffering and keeps us trapped in samsara. Freedom from this is nirvana, or liberation, which means that we have overcome the gross disturbing-thought obscurations. Eventually we attain full enlightenment, which means that we have overcome the subtle obscurations to knowledge.

The door to enlightenment is bodhicitta, and to attain enlightenment quickly we need to actualize the Vajrayana path, which is reached through the door of tantric initiation. However, these two doors will not open for us unless we have stepped through the first door, the door to all the teachings of the Buddha, which is taking refuge. When we do this, benefits pour down on us like monsoon rain. All the negative karmic imprints collected from beginningless time are easily purified, the two collections of merit needed to attain high realizations are easily accumulated, and we attain great happiness both now and in the future. Without stepping through this first door, none of this can happen. An inner being is somebody who has stepped through this first door, whereas an outer being is somebody who has not, and is still outside the path to enlightenment.

Lama Atisha says that whether we are an inner being or not—that is, whether or not we have started our journey toward liberation and enlightenment—is defined by whether we have taken refuge. It’s as clear as that.

- Taking refuge brings every success, including the greatest success of full enlightenment
- Without taking refuge we can’t step through the doors of bodhicitta and tantric initiation
- Becoming an inner being on the journey to enlightenment depends on taking refuge

Refuge

4 The benefits of taking refuge

4.8 We will soon be enlightened

ONCE WE have formally taken refuge, we assume a certain responsibility for our behavior. We should watch our mind and examine the inner processes of action and reaction: “What is my mind doing now? What impulse is arising? When I act like this, what is the result?” For example, we should observe how others react when we utter empty, unnecessary words or when we talk without understanding what we are saying. Words are very powerful. Bodily communication also has a strong effect on others; our posture, movements and facial expressions make a deep impression on other people’s minds. Since most of our problems involve other people, it is important to be aware of our behavior and to avoid harming anyone.

In ordinary friendships we often confuse attachment with affection. For instance, my friend might show his apparent affection for me by suggesting that we go out drinking together. If I decline, he might think me unfriendly and feel rejected, so I give in. This is how friends can bring us down. He didn’t use threats or force, but by displaying the kind of affection that consists only of clinging and attachment, he led me into a situation I would rather have avoided. It is therefore essential that we develop the wisdom-eye that distinguishes true love from mere attachment and can see the difference between what benefits us and what harms us. We should rely entirely on this wisdom, rather than on our ever-fluctuating emotional responses.

If we make no attempt to control our behavior and our distracted, scattered mind, we shall not get very far. We must act with discriminating wisdom in order to create the best internal conditions for achieving our aims.

- Once we’ve formally taken refuge, we must take responsibility for our behavior
- Using our wisdom, we should discriminate which friendships bring benefit or harm
- We need to create the best internal conditions for achieving our aims

Refuge

5 Advice after taking refuge

5.1 What to avoid



REPECT FOR holy objects entails seeing them as the actual Buddha and because of that always treating them with great reverence. Statues, thangkas and tsatsas of buddhas and other holy objects are very powerful; therefore, to respect them and make offerings to them creates incredible merit, whereas to disrespect them creates very heavy negative karma.

Irrespective of the quality of the workmanship or the material, we should not see holy objects as mere statues or images. A statue made of kaka should be treated with the same respect as a priceless jade Buddha. It obscures the mind to discriminate because of the quality—saying that this statue is beautiful but that one is cheap and ugly—because we would be saying that the Buddha is ugly. The statue is the Buddha, whether it is made of mud and crudely shaped, or made of diamonds by the most skilled artist in the world. To make such judgments pollutes the mind and it becomes very difficult to have realizations on the path to enlightenment.

We should respect all holy images. This is an action of the mind, but we should also act respectfully toward them, putting the image in a place higher than our seat and in a clean and dry place, such as on an altar. But we certainly shouldn't place them on the high shelf where we keep our cleaning stuff. If we see a broken statue or a small piece of a drawing of the Buddha on the road or on the floor—even if we find it in the garbage—we should touch it on our crown and then put it up in a high, clean place, thinking that we are putting the actual living Buddha there.

- Respect for holy objects entails seeing them as the actual Buddha
- Discriminating between holy objects will pollute our mind and prevent realizations
- We should act respectfully toward all holy images by keeping them in a high clean place

Refuge

5 Advice after taking refuge

5.2 What to practice

5.2.1 Respect holy objects

BECAUSE DHARMA texts represent the holy mind of the Buddha, they themselves are holy. Many beings have attained high realizations and enlightenment through studying these texts, which contain the key to all attainments and happiness. When we see a Dharma book, we shouldn't just see it as sheets of paper bound together but as the Dharma jewel, putting our palms together in the prostration mudra and praying that we can realize the entire Dharma through the wisdom within its pages. When we see scriptural collections like the Kangyur and Tengyur we should always pray to have their blessing and to one day realize all that is within them.

With constant awareness that each word of Dharma is sacred, there are specific ways in which we should respect Dharma texts and avoid disrespecting them. Generally, because the Dharma is the cause of all happiness, texts should be revered by keeping them in a clean, high place. They should never be put in dirty places, on the floor or under a bed, and never be taken into a bathroom. Disrespecting them in such ways creates huge obstacles in our mind, making any spiritual development difficult. With a real sense that they are sacred, we should place Dharma books very neatly and attractively on high shelves and never mix them with novels, other worldly books or magazines.

Every single word of the Buddha's doctrine is priceless and we should treat it as such. Even if there are just a few words on a torn scrap of paper, we should have utmost respect for them. The whole path to enlightenment is based on these words, which are the roadmap that leads us from suffering to freedom.

- Dharma texts represent the holy mind of the Buddha, so they too are holy
- There are specific ways in which we should revere and take care of Dharma texts
- Every single word of the Buddha's doctrine is priceless and deserves our utmost respect

Refuge

5 Advice after taking refuge

5.2 What to practice

5.2.2 Respect the written texts



THE DEFINITION of conventional Sangha is four fully-ordained members of the Sangha who are living purely in the vows but have yet to realize the absolute Dharma. They inspire and guide us on the entire path to enlightenment, so if we have taken refuge it is our responsibility to respect them. If we are very close to Tibetan Buddhism and have received teachings from high Tibetan lamas, it might be easy to generate great respect for these lamas, but this precept includes all Sangha: all monks and nuns in the Tibetan tradition and all other Mahayana and Hinayana Sangha as well.

Holding a judgmental mind toward the Sangha—seeing one member as more important or worthy of support than another—is very dangerous. No matter who the person is or with which part of Buddhism they are affiliated, we should show respect. We should view anybody in robes as the helper who has the power to guide us out of all the sufferings of samsara. By thinking like this, respect will automatically arise and the benefits from having that respect will naturally follow.

Not only should we respect anybody in robes, we should respect the robes themselves as symbols of the Sangha jewel. If we see them on the floor, we should step around them or, if that is not possible, respectfully move them to one side. If they are just lying on the ground—perhaps they have accidentally fallen off a washing line—we should pick them up and place them in a clean place, thinking that those who wear these robes have qualities that we can only aspire to.

- After taking refuge, we must respect monks and nuns of every Buddhist tradition
- Anyone in robes should be considered our helper, without making judgments
- We should also respect the robes themselves as symbols of the Sangha jewel

Refuge

5 Advice after taking refuge

5.2 What to practice

5.2.3 Respect the Sangha

BESIDES THE specific things we should do and avoid concerning each of the Three Rare Sublime Ones, there are six general practices, or precepts, concerning all three refuge jewels collectively. These practices are what really constitute our daily life as a Buddhist. Most of all, we should do everything with compassion.

If we always keep the Three Rare Sublime Ones in our heart, every action we do will be Dharma. However, the texts also say we should actually *take refuge three times in the morning and three times at night*. Before eating and drinking, we should *first offer the food and drink* to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. We must *explain the Dharma to others*, according to their level of understanding, and *study the Dharma* as much as possible. Whenever virtuous teachers give teachings—whether it's somebody with whom we have made a Dharma connection or not—if possible we should take the opportunity to attend them. This is to *always rely on the holy beings*. Relying on the guru and the Three Rare Sublime Ones is the responsibility of the disciple, so we must *guard our refuge and never give it up*. Furthermore, we should take as many vows, such as the eight Mahayana precepts, as we can.

The Buddha was so kind and compassionate. By giving us the various levels of precept, he gave us the perfect tools to protect our mind in everyday life. Whatever we do, whatever we eat or drink and whenever we communicate with others, we always have these means of protection, thus ensuring that everything we do is skillful and beneficial. This is the Buddha's advice, helping us make every moment beneficial and turning every single action into the cause of enlightenment.

- There are six general practices that constitute our daily life as a Buddhist
- *Taking refuge; offering food and drink; guiding others; studying; relying on holy beings*
- These precepts are the perfect tools to protect our mind in everyday life

Refuge

5 Advice after taking refuge

5.2 What to practice

5.2.4 General practices

WHEN WE take refuge we visualize our father to our right, our mother to our left, our worst enemy—the sentient being who agitates us the most—in front of us, and our dearest friend—the person to whom we are most attached—behind us. All other sentient beings surround us on all sides.

This visualization is a good example of Mahayana psychology. If we were asked where we would like to put our best friend, we would normally say, “Oh, here! In front of me!” Similarly, we would prefer to put our enemy behind us, out of sight. Instead, when we take refuge we put our enemy right in front. We look at them and examine their life sincerely. We think of the problems that our own uncontrolled mind causes and realize that our enemy is in exactly the same predicament. Thus, we should generate great compassion for our enemy and, with that, take refuge. This is the best way of taking refuge.

Visualizing all mother sentient beings around us while taking refuge is a very powerful way to overcome excessive concern for our own problems. Many of us are obsessed with our own problems; we cannot forget them and never stop to think what others are experiencing. When we finally realize that others have exactly the same troubles that we do, we start to feel, “I’m not the worst person in the world after all; nor am I alone in my suffering. There are many just like me. I should have exactly the same sort of compassion for them as I do for myself.”

- The refuge visualization puts our enemy in front and our closest friend behind us
- The best way to take refuge is to first generate great compassion for our enemy
- This is a very powerful way to overcome our obsession with our own problems

WE SHOULD take refuge with an understanding of Buddha's teaching, with clean-clear honesty and truth, with a wisdom-mind. We must understand the connection between Buddha and ourselves. Buddha has universal love and compassion and complete understanding of reality. We also have compassion and love for people, but it's limited. We also have wisdom; to some extent we understand ourselves, but again, it's limited. So we want to lift ourselves up, have better understanding. We want Buddha's omnipresent compassion and love and our compassion and love to communicate, to connect, to unify exactly.

We shouldn't think, "Oh, but I do not have enough qualities." We do have the qualities of love, compassion and wisdom. Buddhism emphasizes that human beings—we ourselves—are as important as the Buddha. We should have confidence that our present limited wisdom, love and compassion can be limitlessly developed. There is no way to stop its development. The development of material substances is limited, but mental wisdom-energy can develop infinitely.

Our love can expand without limitation. Our compassion can likewise increase limitlessly. We must remember this. It's beautiful, isn't it? This energy, the human mind, has no limitation at all. So we should have strong motivation and strong confidence. Even though momentarily we feel we cannot have love and compassion for some people, this is only superficial. Today, we have changed our mind: "I can give, I can love." Today, we should make our enemy our object of compassion. We can do it.

- Taking refuge depends on understanding the connection between Buddha and ourselves
- We need to have the confidence that our inner qualities can develop infinitely
- Our love and compassion can definitely expand without limitation

W^HATEVER WE do that protects our mind is Dharma, and that, in essence, is taking refuge, whether or not we call ourselves Buddhist, whether or not we have taken formal refuge. When we cut through our confusion by meditating on impermanence and death, we are taking refuge. When we lessen our attachment by meditating on its shortcomings and on the problems brought by the eight worldly dharmas, we are taking refuge. Developing compassion and loving kindness, moving the mind toward the altruistic attitude of bodhicitta, is taking refuge. Studying and meditating on emptiness—how the self and all phenomena are empty of inherent existence—is taking refuge.

When we develop contentment and satisfaction, we are protected from present and future suffering and from huge problems like depression, aggression or suicidal jealousy. Habitual aggravations and unhappiness, things that have been part of our life for many years, are eliminated as soon as we practice Dharma sincerely. Our Dharma practice—our pure mind and good heart—immediately protects us from problems that we may have suffered from for months or years. And because we have eliminated the wrong attitude, we stop creating negative karma; therefore, it protects us from future rebirths in the suffering realms. Protected from creating the cause of samsara, we are protected from the fear of samsara.

All this is based on refuge—having refuge in our mind and relying on the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Just as Guru Shakyamuni Buddha and all the numberless past bodhisattvas and buddhas actualized the path and attained liberation and enlightenment, we too can actualize the path and attain liberation and enlightenment. Then, like them, we will be able to do perfect work and help enlighten numberless sentient beings.

- Whatever we do that protects our mind is Dharma, and that is taking refuge
- Sincere Dharma practice protects us from present and future suffering
- Through having refuge in our mind, we can attain liberation and enlightenment

DAY 169

WITH A DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF TAKING REFUGE,
WE WILL BEGIN TO TASTE THE HONEY OF LORD
BUDDHA'S WISDOM —LAMA YESHE

TAKING REFUGE in Buddhadharma is important. Why? Taking a pill when we feel restless is only a temporary solution for our mental illness. When they become nervous, many people take a tranquilizer, don't they? The restless mind takes refuge in a tranquilizing pill. This is not the professional way of taking refuge; it does not really solve the problem.

All of us have had some experience of reaching the clean-clear state through our own strength and by seeing with clarity what our relative problems are and the absolute state that we can achieve. Therefore, now we need determination. Then we will discover that the ultimate refuge is Dharma, which is wisdom, great compassion and great love. This is the true path, true Dharma. This is the way to elevate ourselves. Self-pity-ignorant temporal solutions cannot elevate us. They lead nowhere and just make us more dull.

That is why determination is very important. It gives us strength. When we have a good experience, we should confirm it within our mind. We need confirmation and determination. We should think, "This is the way I should solve the problems of my life. I am not going to take ultimate refuge in this fruit. I may take temporal refuge in this fruit; I may eat it and stop the hungry ghost feeling. But the ultimate refuge is something that brings everlasting satisfaction, and that comes through Dharma, through the Buddha's teachings. Buddha himself discovered great wisdom, great compassion and great love through his own wisdom light. So this is the way I can help myself." We must make a strong determination.

- The restless mind takes refuge in tranquilizers but they do not solve our problems
- Self-pity-ignorant temporal solutions lead nowhere: only the true Dharma can help
- We must determine strongly to follow the Buddha to solve the problems of our life

*Refuge
Wrap-up*



KARMA, like so many Buddhist philosophical terms, is a Sanskrit word, but we mustn't think that because the word is foreign the idea must be complicated. Every day we eat, drink, sleep, walk and communicate with others. All that energy is karma. Simply put, whatever energy activates our body, speech and mind, that's karma. Every karmic action brings about a karmic reaction, which in turn produces another reaction and so on. At this point it is not necessary to complicate the subject further. It is enough to state that happiness is the karmic result of actions performed with a virtuous motivation and suffering is the result of nonvirtuous actions.

From our birth until now, everything we have said, thought and done has created the potential for future karmic consequences. There hasn't been a single moment when we have not begun such a chain of events. We may not believe in karma and cause and effect. Nevertheless, it is still there, like a constantly ticking watch.

When we gain an appreciation of this ongoing process and become aware of how many unskillful actions we habitually perform, we can easily see how we continue to create problems for ourselves. Every minute, we perform hundreds of karmic actions, yet we are hardly conscious of any of them. In the stillness of meditation, however, approaching the study of Dharma, we can listen to our mind, the source of all this activity. We learn to be aware of our actions to a far greater extent than ever before. This self-awareness leads to self-control, enabling us to master our karma rather than have it master us.

- Karma is a simple idea: it's whatever energy activates our body, speech and mind
- Everything we say, think and do creates the potential for future karmic consequences
- By becoming aware of our actions, we can master karma rather than have it master us

If I were to try to compare the subject of karma to the kinds of things that are studied in the West, I'd say that it parallels in some ways the theory of the evolution of everything that exists. Karma encompasses everything on earth and beyond, every existent phenomenon in the universe, throughout infinite space—in Buddhist terms, every phenomenon in samsara and nirvana. Karma is the energy of all phenomena and has nothing to do with what our mind believes.

If karma encompasses all relative phenomena, are these phenomena interconnected? Well, even modern science understands that all the energy in the universe is interdependently related; it's not just Buddhist dogma. For example, where does all the green vegetation we see around us come from? It doesn't arise without cause. First there has to be a cause; then, the effect—the relative appearance of the green—arises. Similarly, each of us also has a cause; we, too, are interdependent phenomena. We depend on other energies for our existence. Those energies, in turn, depend on yet other energies. In this way, all energy is linked.

Intuitively, our ego has this notion that we're independent, that we're not a dependent phenomenon. That's complete rubbish. If we look, we can easily see how we're interdependent. It looks complicated; it's not complicated. It only becomes complicated if our mind thinks it's complicated. Our mind makes things up; that's karma, too—an interdependent phenomenon, it exists in relation to other energy. If we understand the basic simplicity of this, we'll be more careful in the way we act because we'll realize that every single action of our body, speech and mind produces a reaction.

- Karma encompasses all phenomena in samsara and nirvana
- All relative phenomena are interdependent and arise from a cause
- Understanding that every action produces a reaction makes us act with more care

IF WE wish to follow the Mahayana path, then attaining enlightenment must be the main motivation for everything we do. However, the most important consideration within our practice at this stage is being careful of what karma we create now. We have great goals but death might have other ideas. The realizations we seek are in the future; death might well be in the next moment.

Therefore, each step we take on the path to enlightenment starts with our being aware of every action we do and thus being able to avoid all negative, harmful actions and practice all positive actions. This is called “observing karma.” Observing our karma is vital for everyone: for beginners just starting to practice Dharma, for those who have an established Dharma practice and even for advanced meditators with high tantric realizations.

If we only take refuge and don’t observe our karma, even if we have complete faith and devotion to the Three Rare Sublime Ones, we cannot be guided by them because we don’t have the necessary tools. We are like a thief who stands in front of a judge. We take refuge in the judge, pleading with them not to punish us and swearing we will never do it again. Maybe the judge believes this and sets us free, but once outside the courthouse we immediately steal something else and get caught. Freedom from punishment is not up to the judge; it only comes from giving up stealing. Similarly, refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha is a vital part of following the Buddhist path, but freedom from suffering—and in particular rebirth in the lower realms—all comes down to following the law of karma.

- Being aware of the karma we create is our most important practice
- Each step on the path to enlightenment starts with being aware of every action we do
- Freedom from suffering all comes down to following the law of karma

THE MISTAKE made by people with no understanding of karma is to regard the external conditions as the main cause of their happiness or suffering. This is simply not so. No matter how terrible it may be, no matter how inexplicable, external factors are never the main cause. The main cause is within our own mind, and the external problem we are facing is only a secondary condition.

Only a buddha can see every single cause and condition without the slightest mistake. For us, it is very difficult to see the reasons behind why things happen. For example, a very successful restaurant suddenly loses money when the owner changes. It is the same place, the same quality of food and the same service—everything is the same except the owner—but somehow, people no longer go to that restaurant. There seems to be no reason for it. The new owner might have an advanced business degree or be the most intelligent person on earth, but that doesn't ensure success. External factors cannot cover everything; there are internal factors at play that are far more important. A person might have all these external factors and might even have great success for a period of time, but without positive karma there will be obstacles, and sooner or later their business will fail. They have simply not created the positive karma to clear obstacles and ensure continued success.

Manipulating the external situation is not the real reason for success—the real answer is karma. Instead of redecorating the place or changing the staff, the new owner of the restaurant should change their own morality. By abandoning nonvirtuous actions, they will have success in the future. External factors are merely conditions—changing the mind is the first answer.

- The main cause of happiness and suffering is not external conditions but our own mind
- Without positive karma, sooner or later we will experience obstacles
- The key to future success is changing the mind and abandoning nonvirtuous actions

SOME PEOPLE argue that karma is experienced only by those who believe in it. In other words, those who don't believe in karma don't experience its effects. This is completely incorrect. If we act in a certain way, we are sure to experience the appropriate result, just as surely as taking poison will make us sick—even though we think it is medicine. Once we've created the karma to experience a certain result, that outcome is inevitable.

Cows, pigs and scorpions have no ideas about karma, no beliefs one way or the other, but they must still live out their karma. All their actions are motivated by either greed, ignorance or hatred, and each definitely brings its own result. Therefore, we must never think that karmic actions and reactions are only a Buddhist thing, a lama thing. Karma is a natural law governing all physical and nonphysical phenomena in the universe. It is extremely important for us to understand this.

Thus, we are all under the control of the true law of karma, whether we believe in it or not. Don't think that followers of Christianity, Judaism and Islam are beyond the reach of karma and do not need to be mindful of it. It's not true. For example, Jews and Arabs have accumulated karma with each other and now there are all sorts of problems in the Middle East. Even though butchers may not believe that killing animals will have any negative repercussions, whether they believe it or not, giving such suffering to other beings will definitely come back upon them.

- If we act in a certain way, we're sure to experience the appropriate result
- Karma is a natural law governing all physical and nonphysical phenomena in the universe
- Everyone is under the control of the law of karma, whether they believe in it or not

WHEN TEACHING on karma we often refer to its four characteristics, the first of which is that karma is definite. Karma means action, our energy, and karma being definite means that once we have set in motion a powerful train of energy it will keep running until it is either interrupted or reaches its conclusion.

Karma being definite does not mean that once we have created a specific karma there's nothing we can do to stop it. That's a wrong view of karma. Take, for example, the attitude of certain followers of the Hindu religion. We'll find many people like this in India and Nepal. They believe in karma but believe it's completely fixed: "I was born a carpenter. God gave me this life. I'll always be a carpenter." "My karma made me a cobbler; I'll always be a cobbler." They are very sincere in their belief but very wrong in thinking that karma can't be changed.

All the energy of our body, speech and mind comes from our consciousness, our mind. If we put our energy into a certain environment and a certain channel, a different form of energy will manifest. It changes. If we direct our conscious energy one way, one kind of result will come; if we direct it another way, a different kind of result arises. It's very simple. But what we do have to know is the source of our actions. Once we have ascertained that we'll see that we are responsible for what we do; we can determine what we do and what happens to us. It's more up to us than to our circumstances, friends, society or anything else outside of us.

- Karma is definite: once set in motion, it continues to run unless interrupted
- Karma is not completely fixed; it can be changed
- We are responsible for what we do and for what happens to us

Karma

1 The four outlines

1.1 Karma is definite



THE SECOND characteristic of karma is that it is expandable, it shows great increase. For example, if we fail to purify the act of killing an insect, after fifteen days it becomes the equivalent of having killed a human being. Without purification, the potential for suffering increases hour by hour and day by day. It doubles, quadruples and then just keeps multiplying like that. It is like planting a seed that becomes a shoot, then a sapling and then a tree, with a trunk, branches, leaves and flowers, and many seeds that drop to the ground to create more trees. An entire forest can come from one small seed.

Left unpurified, all the great and petty negativities we have done accumulate and multiply in our mental continuum, becoming huge, blocking us from experiencing happiness and achieving our goal of enlightenment. Unless we actively try to reverse this situation, our mind just becomes more and more habituated to negativity. Any action done with ignorance, attachment and aversion generates the energy for more ignorance, attachment and aversion. When we fail to apply the antidotes we become addicted to negativity. Left to itself our mind will just run in this direction.

In the same way that negative karma is expandable, so too is positive karma. Therefore, the karmic imprints left on our mind from any positive action will also multiply, unless they are destroyed by anger or heresy. When we practice Dharma we are not just doing it for this life, so it is comforting to know that the seeds of our practice will be carried through to our next life, increasing in power, and we will become more and more able to practice virtue.

- Karma is expandable, like planting a seed that becomes a tree and then a forest
- Unless we apply the antidotes, our mind becomes increasingly habituated to negativity
- Positive karmic imprints are also expandable, making it easier for us to practice virtue

Karma

1 The four outlines

1.2 Karma is expandable

KARMA IS definite in that if we plant a rice seed we will get rice, not corn. The other side of that is that if we want corn but plant rice, we don't get it. This third outline of karma emphasizes that it is impossible to experience the result without having created the cause.

If you are hungry and I eat all the food, that won't alleviate your hunger. You cannot receive my pleasure and I cannot receive yours, nor can we receive each other's suffering. For example, perhaps you have owned a car for a very long time and it has never given you any trouble. But then one day you lend it to a friend and within a mile the car breaks down. This is because you have created the cause to enjoy that car but your friend has not.

Why does one person survive when everybody else dies in an earthquake or a plane crash? Because the first has not created the cause to die and the second has not created the cause to live. Perhaps the first person had saved lives in the past and the second had killed. Why does one person die from an illness that is never usually fatal? Because that person has created the karma to die. Western science cannot explain why one person in an entire community decides to leave home just before an earthquake strikes or why a normally effective medicine does not work in certain cases. It only makes sense in terms of karma—how some people have created the inner cause for happiness and a long life and others haven't. Again, this leads us to the conclusion that we need to take every possible opportunity to create the cause of happiness, even with our most commonplace actions.

- It's impossible to experience the result without having created the cause
- We can't receive each other's pleasure or each other's suffering
- Karma is the only logical explanation for why some people survive disaster or illness

Karma

1 The four outlines

1.3 We cannot meet the result unless we have created the cause



THE FOURTH characteristic of karma is the opposite of the previous one. Just as it is impossible to experience the result without creating the cause, it is impossible not to experience the result if we have created the cause. The result will never be lost. Even if it takes hundreds of eons, unless it is purified, the imprint remains on our mental continuum until the conditions come together for it to ripen. No matter how gross or subtle, no matter how insignificant or powerful, the mental imprints of an action never just disappear.

When something happens out of the blue, it is never without a cause. Say someone is driving a car when suddenly from the side of the road, for no apparent reason, someone shoots them. There has to be a reason. At some time in the past the victim harmed the shooter in a similar way, and when the conditions came together that karma ripened. Similarly, if we get mugged in a park it may seem random, but why did we get mugged and not somebody else? Karma is there, making us suffer because of some negative action we did in the past. Karma ripens in a snap of the fingers and we rarely have a warning. This is happening all over the world at every moment.

We are usually able to justify any negative action we do, finding an excuse and making it seem small to ourselves, but that doesn't make the potential for future suffering any less. Unless we purify it, we will have to experience the result.

- It is impossible not to experience the result if we have created the cause
- When something unexpected happens, there is always a reason—karma is there
- Unless we purify our negative actions, they will definitely lead to future suffering

Karma

1 The four outlines

1.4 Once the cause has been created the result cannot be lost



IN THE same way that Christianity talks about the ten commandments—the ten actions from which we should refrain—Buddhism talks about the ten nonvirtues: actions that come from ignorance, anger, the dissatisfied mind of attachment, the self-cherishing thought and other deluded minds, minds that cause suffering for ourselves and others. There are three actions of body, four of speech and three of mind: killing, stealing and sexual misconduct; lying, divisive speech, harsh words and idle gossip; covetousness, ill will and heresy.

The three unwholesome actions of the mind are the most harmful because they trigger the other seven nonvirtues of body and speech. There is no way to transform the three nonvirtues of mind into virtue. It is like trying to transform darkness into light. We can eliminate the darkness by bringing light, but we cannot transform the darkness itself into light. Similarly, we can clean a dirty cloth, but the dirt itself cannot be transformed. On the other hand, the three actions of body and the four of speech can be transformed into virtue, depending on the motivation. This is why the Mahayana teachings mainly emphasize mental attitude, not external actions.

There are, of course, many more types of negative actions we can do, but this traditional list gives us the major ones, and by knowing these we will come to easily differentiate virtue from nonvirtue—the difference between holy Dharma and worldly action—and be able to judge each action we do, from morning to night.

- Buddhism talks about ten nonvirtues: three of body, four of speech and three of mind
- The three nonvirtues of the mind are always negative and trigger all the others
- Understanding the ten nonvirtues enables us to judge each action we do

Karma

2 The negative karmic process

2.1 The ten nonvirtues



MOST PEOPLE agree that killing is wrong, but in order to properly refrain from it we need to understand what killing means in respect to the ten nonvirtues. We need to know the four factors that make a complete action of killing: the intention, the base, the action itself and the completion.

The intention is to kill a sentient being, and the object to be killed—the base—is that sentient being. It must be a living being with sentience, with a mind that experiences happiness and suffering. The worst forms of killing are taking the life of a parent or an arhat. Many people think that killing only refers to humans, and that other beings are not important, but here the definition of killing involves all sentient beings, from a human being to the tiniest insect. The action is taking that being's life. The completion is to understand that we have killed. We also incur the nonvirtue of killing if we have somebody else kill for us.

Refraining from killing means that no other human being or animal will receive the harm of being killed by us. Instead, they will receive incredible peace and happiness. To continue refraining from killing means that all living beings in the world will receive more and more happiness and peace from us, and less and less harm. Therefore, this is definitely our most practical contribution to world peace. Refraining from killing makes every day, every minute, every second of our life utterly meaningful. It is an indispensable tool for achieving our own happiness and brings much peace to all sentient beings as well.

- To refrain from killing, we need to understand the factors that make it a complete action
- These are: the intention to kill, the object, taking life and the other being's death
- Refraining from killing is our most practical contribution to world peace

*Karma**2 The negative karmic process**2.1 The ten nonvirtues**2.1.1 Killing*

As with all negative actions, stealing involves an intention, a base or object, the action itself and completion. The intention is to take something that belongs to another, caused by craving for the object and one of the three poisonous minds of ignorance, attachment or anger. Here the ignorance is not only the ignorance of seeing things as having true or inherent existence but in particular the ignorance of karma.

The base is an object that we want that belongs to another being. It must belong to or be kept by that being, be something that has not been freely offered to us and have some value—which is said to be anything more than a grain of rice. The Tibetan word for stealing means “taking that which is not given.” This makes it very clear what stealing is. The action is the actual taking and the completion is the thought, “Now this is mine.”

If we get something by cunning or cheating, it is stealing. If we get others to steal for us, it is stealing. We might be on a train, and because the conductor does not come around to ask for our ticket we get a free trip. Many of us are quite pleased if we can get away with something like this, thinking that we have been clever or lucky, but really it is stealing. Actually, we would have been luckier had we paid because then we would have had a safe journey without creating negative karma. Not thinking of the positive karma of abstaining from stealing and thinking instead how lucky we were to get away without paying, we complete the action of stealing.

- Stealing is caused by craving and is due to either ignorance, attachment or anger
- The Tibetan word for stealing defines it as “taking that which is not given”
- Stealing can take many forms, such as avoiding paying a train fare

Karma

2 The negative karmic process

2.1 The ten nonvirtues

2.1.2 Stealing

SEXUAL MISCONDUCT is defined as having any form of sex that is inappropriate and harmful in some way, such as with another person's partner or at the wrong place or time. Like all actions, to be complete it needs the four aspects: intention, base, action and completion. The disturbing thought that causes us to commit sexual misconduct is one of the three poisonous minds. The motivation is wishing to have sexual intercourse. The action is the meeting of the sexual organs of the two people. Completion is the experience of sexual pleasure.

Some aspects of sexual misconduct are heavier than others, which has to do with harming the other person. Adultery is heavier than simply having sex with a partner but using an improper orifice. Having intercourse with a person who has taken the eight Mahayana precepts is heavy because of the power of the object. Having intercourse with a pregnant person is considered sexual misconduct because of the risk of harming the baby.

Having sex in these ways is not as obviously harmful as rape or infidelity. However, the main point behind these prohibitions is that the sexual act is done with attachment and is the creator of confusion and disharmony, usually in the form of jealousy and anger between people and especially between couples. This leads to many other negative actions such as lying, slandering, covetousness and physical harm. It can even become a basis for killing each other. Then the final solution could be suicide. Unbelievable problems can come from one act of sexual misconduct.

- Sexual misconduct is defined as having any form of sex that is inappropriate and harmful
- The more the other person is harmed, the heavier the karma created
- Sexual misconduct creates confusion and disharmony and leads to unbelievable problems

Karma

2 The negative karmic process

2.1 The ten nonvirtues

2.1.3 Sexual misconduct



LYING TO GET WHAT WE WANT ONCE, WE FIND IT
EASIER TO LIE THE NEXT TIME AND IT COMES
MORE NATURALLY EACH TIME WE DO IT
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

THREE ARE four nonvirtuous actions of speech, the first of which is telling lies. If we deny having experienced a particular object with our five sense consciousnesses—eye, ear, nose, tongue or body—when in fact we have, or, conversely, if we say we have when we haven't, then that is telling a lie.

However, we need to be aware of a falsehood for it to be a lie. For example, perhaps we managed to make our mind blank once when we meditated and we wrongly think this is emptiness. We tell our friends with visible pride that we have realized emptiness, and in our own mind we really believe this. In our own mind this is the truth, so therefore we are not “changing the recognition,” which is the definition of lying.

The base is the other person who has understood our meaning, which often means having heard and understood our words, but can also be some form of nonverbal understanding. If the other person has not understood, then it is not the complete action of lying. The action is either something verbal, remaining silent or making some movement of the body. The motivation is wishing to give the other person a false recognition. For example, maybe we have no experience of seeing a buddha or bodhisattva, but we want others to think that we are very special and therefore hint that we have had that experience. The motivation is to deceive, no matter how it is carried out. The worst forms of lying are pretending to have siddhis, such as having control over delusion or having realizations, and lying to holy beings such as arhats or gurus.

- The first nonvirtuous action of speech is telling lies
- The definition of lying is to deliberately “change the recognition”
- The worst forms of lying are pretending to have realizations and lying to holy beings

Karma

2 The negative karmic process

2.1 The ten nonvirtues

2.1.4 Lying



THE BASE for divisive speech is any sentient being. The thought is one or more of the disturbing thoughts. The motivation is either the wish to cause a split between a couple or a group of sentient beings who are harmonious, the wish to widen the split, or the wish to maintain disharmony between a couple or group. If we are jealous of a group, we do everything we can to make them quarrel and fight. When they do, we rejoice and try to make sure they never make up. The worst form of divisive speech results in the separation of a disciple or disciples from their guru or disunity among a group of monks or nuns.

The action is to say things with the intent of divisiveness, even if the words are true. For example, telling someone that their partner has been critical of them, not because we feel they should know but in order to create a division between them. Or we might say that the partner has a lover, when they don't. Unlike the previous example, this is a lie, but it shares the same intention to create disharmony. It may be that a third person has criticized one member of a couple and we maliciously pass that information on, knowing it will cause trouble.

It is enough that the other person has heard and understood our words, whether or not they have the desired effect. Perhaps we have slandered somebody's partner with the wish that they end the relationship, but that person sees through us. This is still the nonvirtue of divisive speech even though it does not achieve its intended aim.

- Divisive speech aims to cause, widen or prolong a disharmonious split
- The action is to say things with the intent of divisiveness, even if our words are true
- What we say is divisive speech, whether or not it causes the disharmony we intended

Karma

2 The negative karmic process

2.1 The ten nonvirtues

2.1.5 Divisive speech

THE BASE for harsh speech is a sentient being. Driven by disturbing thoughts, wanting to hurt somebody, we speak harsh words to them. The disturbing thought is often anger but it could also be ignorance or attachment. We could, for example, be attached to a person's possessions and cause an argument in order to get them. The motivation is wishing to harm the other being. The action is actually using harsh words—pointing out the other person's faults or finding something they are sensitive about and using that to attack them, whether or not the words are true. It could be in regard to their education, social status, appearance, friends or conduct. The worst form of harsh speech is to insult our guru, our parents or an arhat.

Our words do not necessarily need to be violent; they may be very polite and softly spoken, although their intent is to harm. We could, for example, sweetly compliment the other person on what a great tantric practitioner they are and how they are extremely lucky that, unlike us, they can take alcohol without becoming drunk or breaking any precepts. Of course, we are being sarcastic and the words are meant to hurt. The texts say the completion is when the other person hears and understands our meaning.

Using harsh words affectionately and as a joke also creates karma, although it's obviously not as heavy as if we do it with anger. We are creating the habit of using harsh words. The heaviness of the karma also depends on the object. If we jokingly insult a member of the Sangha, for example, that is heavier than saying the same thing to a lay friend.

- Using harsh words is an action motivated by wanting to harm another sentient being
- Harsh words don't need to be violent; they may be very polite and softly spoken
- Using harsh words affectionately or as a joke also creates negative karma

Karma

2 The negative karmic process

2.1 The ten nonvirtues

2.1.6 Harsh speech



IDLE GOSSIP is saying something that is meaningless—speaking without any real purpose. The base is traditionally said to be sentient beings, although it is still gossip if we are talking to ourselves with nobody listening or paying attention, or if our listener is deaf. The disturbing thought is ignorance, anger or attachment. The intention is wishing to speak whatever comes into our mind despite the fact it has no purpose. It is not necessary to recognize that we are actually gossiping, but we do need to be aware of the subject matter. The action is attempting to gossip and the completion is having finished gossiping. Although gossiping is not as heavy as the other nonvirtuous actions, it becomes heavier depending on the frequency with which we do it and the completeness of the action.

The texts offer examples such as talking about the quarrels of others or debating something that only appears to be the Dharma, for instance, texts written by non-Buddhists. Gossip also includes talking about mundane problems and difficulties without a positive motivation. Therefore, the main thing to check is our motivation. Is it the pleasure of showing off to others, telling them about our achievements or the difficult life we've had? Are we talking simply to make people laugh, without any other purpose beyond that? Chatting at parties without any Dharma reason is gossiping, depending on our motivation.

When bodhisattvas or Dharma practitioners speak about life's difficulties, their purpose is for either themselves or the person listening to renounce samsara. When they talk about the enjoyments of life, it is to show the results of good karma. Even if they are talking to make others laugh, their motivation is different.

- The definition of idle gossip is to say something meaningless and without real purpose
- The main thing to check is our motivation—for example, are we just showing off?
- In contrast, the speech of bodhisattvas is motivated by a wish to share the Dharma

*Karma**2 The negative karmic process**2.1 The ten nonvirtues**2.1.7 Idle gossip*

COVETOUSNESS is the attachment that wants things. The base is the possessions of others, which can be anything that somebody else has. Traditionally, the texts mention animals, such as horses, cows or dogs. The worst form of covetousness is the desire for an *arya* being's belongings. There are five points for a mind of covetousness to be a complete nonvirtuous action. First, we have *great attachment to our own possessions*, and then we have the painful, dissatisfied mind of *attachment that wishes to collect more possessions*. We then *perceive a desirable possession* that belongs to somebody else, *develop an attachment to it* and finally *decide that we want that possession for ourselves*.

The nonvirtue of covetousness is simply the mind wanting that object. There is no need to go beyond that to the mind that actually resolves to acquire the object—planning to get it and actually getting it are different nonvirtues. Quite possibly the object is unobtainable. We might desire to own the whole of New York, including all the banks, but of course that is an impossible dream. Nevertheless, we might still covet it and hence still create the negative karma of covetousness with regard to that object.

Because of covetousness we create negative actions to acquire those things we covet, which sets up another chain of four suffering results, one of which is to repeat the action in a future life. In this way we perpetuate our suffering. Our mind is so full of delusion that it fills our life, leaving no time or inclination to practice Dharma. The only thing we perfect is the endless cycle of suffering.

- Covetousness is the unsatisfied mind of attachment that wants the possessions of others
- The nonvirtue is simply to want the object—there's no need to actually acquire it
- To acquire the things we covet, we set in motion a chain of suffering results

Karma

2 The negative karmic process

2.1 The ten nonvirtues

2.1.8 Covetousness



THE NEXT nonvirtue of the mind is ill will. The base is another sentient being, the disturbing thoughts are the same as for harsh speech—attachment, anger and ignorance—and the motivation is the wish to harm the other being. This could be the wish to physically hurt them or the wish that they lose their wealth and possessions and become miserable. For example, if we dislike another person we might hope that their business fails or their relationship breaks up.

The action of ill will is wishing to put the thought to give harm into practice. This means that rather than experiencing a flash of anger, we continue to hope the other being comes to some harm. The completion is the definite decision to harm them. The worst form of ill will is the thought of committing one of the five immediate negativities: killing our mother, father or an arhat, maliciously causing blood to flow from a buddha and creating disunity among the Sangha.

For the mind of ill will to be a complete negative action it must have five characteristics. *Holding ourselves and the cause of harm toward ourselves to be truly existent, harboring anger toward that person or being and feeling resentment for the harm that has been done to us, remembering the cause of our anger, and building it up again and again.* This creates *the sense that we are justified* in getting angry and in wishing harm on that person or being. *Having no shame about ill will arising and not being aware of the shortcomings of having ill will; just letting the mind become completely overwhelmed by it.*

- Ill will is motivated by the wish for another sentient being to experience harm or distress
- The action of ill will is to continue hoping that the other being comes to harm
- A mind that is completely overwhelmed by ill will has five characteristics

Karma

2 The negative karmic process

2.1 The ten nonvirtues

2.1.9 Ill will



THIS LAST nonvirtue, heresy, is the most important in many ways because from it all the others flow. Heresy is denying the existence of the four noble truths, the Three Rare Sublime Ones, reincarnation or karma. It can be thinking that the points of the Dharma that the Buddha taught are lies, or that there is no such thing as bodhicitta or omniscience. Many people, through a wrong doctrine or by having met a flawed teacher, believe such things to be untrue. Therefore, the definition of heresy is believing what is true to be untrue.

Heresy can arise due to an imprint from the past. We can come across the Dharma and start to study it, but through the influence of someone else we lose our faith in karma. The disturbing thoughts are ignorance, attachment or anger, and the motivation is wishing to deny the existence of something that does exist. Once the thought comes, the action of heresy is to continuously hold that belief and to speak about it. The completion is to hold a definite conviction about the non-existence of existent things.

Perhaps we accept the general concepts we find in Buddhism, but some of the specifics feel uncomfortable to our way of thinking, such as the details of karma. We cannot disprove them, but inside we find it difficult to have faith in the complete teachings on karma as the Buddha taught them. Before the flood of heresy sweeps over us, we should think about our own level of understanding compared to that of the great teachers who have verified these teachings from their own experience.

- Heresy is the belief in the non-existence of an existent object, such as karma
- The action of heresy is to continuously hold a wrong belief and to speak about it
- Heresy can be averted by comparing our understanding to that of the great teachers

Karma

2 The negative karmic process

2.1 The ten nonvirtues

2.1.10 Heresy



ONLY BY UNDERSTANDING KARMA AND SEEING WHY
WE ARE SUFFERING CAN WE STOP THIS CONTINUAL
ROUND OF PROBLEM AFTER PROBLEM
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

THREE ARE many factors that determine the strength of the karma we create and the heaviness of its result. Pabongka Dechen Nyingpo lists six: *the nature of the action; the intention; the deed; the base; the frequency of the act; and the act not being purified.*

If all other factors are equal, then the ten nonvirtues have different degrees of heaviness. Pabongka Rinpoche says that the seven nonvirtues of body and speech are listed in the order of their heaviness: from killing as the heaviest to idle gossip as the lightest. Of the three nonvirtues of mind, heresy is the heaviest negative action. The stronger the negative intention, the more powerful the karma created, and hence the stronger the suffering that will be experienced. Although monetary value is not that important an aspect, the more valuable the possession we steal, the more it hurts the owner, and the heavier the karma we create. The heaviness of the karma also depends on the power of the object. Some beings are more powerful for us, such as our parents, bodhisattvas, buddhas and, of course, our guru.

When we create the result similar to the cause we are habituating our mind to repeating the action and therefore the result becomes heavier, even though the nonvirtuous action itself might not seem that heavy. Gossiping is a perfect example of this. And we have already seen that because karma expands, if we fail to purify a negative action the suffering we will experience from it when the imprint ripens will get heavier and heavier. An action also becomes heavier the higher the vow we have taken.

- There are many factors that determine the strength of the karma we create
- These include *the nature of the action, the intention, the deed and the base*
- *Actions that are repeated or haven't been purified* will also bring a heavier result

Karma

2 The negative karmic process

2.2 The differences that make for heavy or light karma

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ANY NEGATIVE ACTION SETS UP A CHAIN REACTION
AND LEADS TO MORE AND MORE SUFFERING
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

EVERY NEGATIVE action has four suffering results. The *ripening result* refers to the realm we are born in due to that action, which invariably means the lower realms. Then when we finally get reborn as a human, there are three other suffering results that come from that one action. The *environmental result* refers to the kind of environment we are born into. *Experiencing the result similar to the cause* means we suffer in the same way we made others suffer previously and *creating the result similar to the cause* means we repeat the action due to habituation.

Creating the result similar to the cause is extremely important to understand as this gives us a full understanding of karma. Even if we are born in the upper realms, due to this aspect of karma we are habituated to doing negative actions again. For example, if our previous habit was to kill, in this life it is again our habit to kill. When we kill we collect all four suffering results: rebirth in the lower realms or as a human in a terrible environment; we experience the result similar to the cause by being killed or having our life shortened; and, most importantly, we create the result similar to the cause and are habituated to kill again.

However insignificant the nonvirtue that we commit, we need to understand this aspect of karma: how by becoming more and more habituated to the action, not only do we have more and more suffering in store for us in the future, but we will slowly become used to doing worse and worse actions. As long as we follow delusion and karma we will continue to create nonvirtues and suffer because of them.

- Every negative action has a *ripening result* and then three results when reborn a human
- The worst result is *creating the result similar to the cause*, which brings endless suffering
- Even if a nonvirtue seems insignificant, it habituates us to doing worse and worse actions

Karma

2 The negative karmic process

2.3 The four suffering results

WE'RE USUALLY unconscious whenever we act. For example, when we hurt our loved ones, it's mostly not deliberate but because we're unconscious in our actions. If we were aware that every action of our body, speech and mind constantly reacts internally within us and externally with others, we'd be more sensitive and gentler in what we did, said and thought. Next time we're acting like a wild animal, we should check which channel our energy is in at that time and understand that we can change it—we have the power, the wisdom and the potential to do so.

Also, we have to accept that we're going to make mistakes. Mistakes are possible. We are not Buddha. When we do make an error, instead of freaking out, we should acknowledge it. We even feel happy about it: "Oh, I made a mistake. It's good that I noticed." Once we've recognized a mistake, we can investigate it intensively: "What's its background? What caused it?" Mistakes don't just pop up without reason. We should check in which channel our mind was running when that mistake happened. When we discover this, we can change our attitude.

In particular, we have to understand that negative actions come from us, so it's up to us to do something to prevent their negative reactions from manifesting. It's our responsibility to act and not sit back, waiting for the inevitable suffering result to arise. Therefore, instead of simply accepting what happens to us, believing "this is my karma" and never trying to work with and change our energy for the better, we must understand that we can control what happens to us and must try to be as aware of our actions as much as we possibly can.

- We must check our behavior and know we have the power and wisdom to change it
- By acknowledging our mistakes we can use them to help us change our attitude
- Since all our negative actions come from within us, we have the responsibility to control them

Karma

2 The negative karmic process



THE OPPOSITE of committing the ten nonvirtuous actions is making a complete determination to practice the ten virtues: refraining from *kill*ing, *steal*ing, *sexual misconduct*, *lying*, *divisive speech*, *harsh words* and *gossip*, and cultivating the virtuous minds of *non-attachment*, *non-hatred* and *non-ignorance*. The ten virtues are the basis of all happiness, of every realization, of liberation and full enlightenment. Therefore, practicing the ten virtues is of much greater value than many universes filled with jewels.

To refrain from committing one, some or all of the nonvirtues, even for a day, has four happy results. The *ripening result* is always being reborn in the fortunate upper realms, as a god or a human. The other results are related to the specific virtues we have practiced, but generally the *environmental result* means being born in a beautiful place, with wealth, good crops and plenty to eat and drink, having a long and healthy life and so forth. The most important is *creating the result similar to the cause*. This means that because we have taken vows to refrain from the nonvirtues in a previous life and have made offerings to the buddhas and so forth, we will naturally do these virtuous activities again in this life. In this way we ensure that our happiness can only continue to increase.

Just as there are many more nonvirtues than the traditional list of ten, the list of ten virtues is just a guide. There are innumerable virtuous things we can do. We can take these ten as the root of our happiness and understand that all happiness comes from virtue, including mundane happiness and entering the Hinayana or Mahayana paths, all the way to liberation and enlightenment.

- Just as the ten nonvirtues lead to suffering, the ten virtues lead to happiness
- Their most important result is that we naturally continue to do virtuous activities
- The list of ten virtues is only a guide—there are innumerable virtuous things we can do

Karma

3 The positive karmic process

3.1 The positive karmic process and its results



IN BUDDHISM, we feel that an action may look religious or non-religious, but it is difficult to distinguish whether it is good or bad. The distinction of good or bad comes from our attitude. Behind each action, there is the history of the action in our mind. Every action is interdependent and it is our attitude of mind that makes the action good or bad.

I'll give you a good example. There once was a rich man who made many offerings to a monastery, spending a lot of money sponsoring a puja, or ceremony, that was performed by many thousands of monks. But he did it with the attitude of the eight worldly dharmas, for the purpose of enhancing his reputation. Outside, a beggar saw what was going on and rejoiced with pure motivation. When, at the end, the abbot did the dedication, he dedicated the merit to the beggar and never even mentioned the rich man who had given all that money. He spent all that money but did not have a pure motivation. Externally, it looked like he was doing something good, sponsoring a religious ceremony, but internally, his motivation was worldly, negative. The beggar didn't do anything other than rejoice, but because of his pure motivation, he was the one who received great benefit.

It is not the action itself but the motivation that is important, because a sympathetic motivation brings openness and makes us lose our selfish darkness. That is all; that is the main point.

- It is our mental attitude that makes an action good or bad
- Due to their different motivations, a beggar created merit while a rich man did not
- A sympathetic motivation brings openness and makes us lose our selfish darkness

Karma

3 The positive karmic process

3.1 The positive karmic process and its results

IT IS said that if we were to put all the worldly beings of all the universes into prison and blind them, this would not be as heavy as simply glancing sharply with anger at a bodhisattva. This is because of the power of bodhicitta and because the bodhisattva's body is unbelievably precious. Conversely, looking at a bodhisattva respectfully, with a calm mind, creates much more merit than giving sight to all the sentient beings of all three realms combined.

Once we have made that Dharma connection and start to relate to holy objects, our positive karma can ripen quickly and powerfully. I often compare it to a flashlight battery. Only when the wires are applied to the two opposite terminals will the light function. Similarly, when we make the decision to connect to the Dharma, the power created makes the Three Rare Sublime Ones the most powerful objects in our life. These powerful objects are the perfect field in which to grow our merit. And anything we do with the Dharma is much more powerful than mundane work. For example, just as giving the Dharma is the best form of giving, making offerings of our Dharma practice to the guru and the Three Rare Sublime Ones is the best form of offering we can make.

There are many factors that cause a karmic result to be experienced more powerfully, and intention is one of the most important. Negative karma leads to great suffering with a strong negative motivation and positive karma leads to great happiness with a strong positive motivation. One small stick of incense offered with bodhicitta motivation is unbelievably powerful, whereas, no matter how much material is offered, if there is no positive motivation, it does not become positive.

- The power of the karma we create depends on the power of the object
- Positive karma can ripen quickly and powerfully after making a Dharma connection
- Offering one small stick of incense with bodhicitta motivation is very powerful

Karma

3 The positive karmic process

3.2 The doors that unintentionally lead to powerful karma

THE MORE vows we take—whether those of a lay person, monk or nun—the more we ensure ourselves of happiness and freedom. They not only help us refrain from committing negative actions; they also free us from confusion, even in this life, and assure us of good rebirths for tens of thousands of lifetimes. In our next rebirth we can again practice morality and establish even more strongly our route to ultimate happiness. Because karma is expandable, all this can come from keeping just one vow for one day, so think what keeping all the vows every day can do. It is a one-way ticket to liberation and enlightenment.

There is a big difference between having made a vow in front of a holy object and not having made a vow. Just because we are not actually killing at this moment doesn't mean we are always practicing the virtue of non-killing. Say we are in hospital with our arms and legs in plaster. How can we kill? There is no motivation not to kill, there is no vow taken in front of a holy object, there is no merit, even if we live for a hundred years.

However, if we consciously take the vow not to kill, we create incredible virtue every single second, whether we are actively thinking of not killing or not. From the moment we take the vow until the end of our life, we continuously create good karma, no matter what we are doing, even if we are doing nothing at all. We continuously create the cause of happiness for many lifetimes, not just for one life, and because karma is expandable, the result is not just happiness in one life, but for many lives.

- Keeping vows is a one-way ticket to liberation and enlightenment
- There's a big difference between making a vow before a holy object and not making it
- Taking a vow not to kill creates continuous good karma even when we're doing nothing

Karma

3 The positive karmic process

3.2 The doors that unintentionally lead to powerful karma



WITH OUR perfect human rebirth we can achieve three great meanings and any future life happiness, including being born with a human body that has the eight ripened qualities: long life, a handsome body, high family, great wealth, trustworthy speech, great power and fame, being male and being strong in mind and body. Lama Tsongkhapa emphasized the importance of these eight ripened qualities for our quick development and for actualizing the path to enlightenment.

If we achieve a human body with these eight qualities we will have quick realizations on the path to enlightenment, so Lama Tsongkhapa explained how to create the cause for each quality. For example, when we abstain from gossiping or other negative actions of the speech, our speech has great power. This means that when we explain Dharma to other sentient beings or tell others, “Doing that action creates negative karma, don’t do it—instead do this virtuous action to benefit others and yourself” other people will listen to us.

When we have a powerful mind and body we become like Milarepa, who was able to bear many hardships to constantly practice Dharma, whatever difficulties he encountered.

- With this body we can attain a human rebirth with the eight ripened qualities
- Each ripened quality has a particular cause and helps us have quick realizations
- When we have a powerful mind and body we can constantly practice Dharma

Karma

3 The positive karmic process

3.3 The ripening qualities



IF THE LAW OF CAUSE AND EFFECT DOES NOT
GUIDE OUR LIFE THERE IS NO DHARMA PRACTICE,
AND WITHOUT THAT ONLY IGNORANCE AND
SUFFERING REMAIN —LAMA YESHE

ONCE WE have a deep understanding of cause and effect and see that every single action has a definite consequence, we will realize how important it is to be conscientious about everything we do. Awareness of karma brings spontaneous awareness of our own behavior. By realizing that positive actions lead inevitably to happiness and negative actions to suffering, we become more discriminating and more conscious of the nature of our own activity.

Sustained conscious awareness of our physical, verbal and mental actions from the moment we wake to the moment we fall asleep is more profound and penetrating than one hour's meditation every morning. This makes sense—an hour's meditation is nothing compared to a day's practice. And if we consider the enormous benefits of even one day's awareness of karma, we can guard against the apathy and depression that can easily infect our practice.

One reason for stressing the value of watching our karma is that many Westerners are very interested in meditation. They love meditation but are not so happy when offered teachings on karma. I am not implying that meditation is unimportant, but even if we have trouble doing formal meditation, we can still practice Dharma perfectly well. Meditation here means always being watchful of our actions and cultivating an attitude of loving kindness rather than one of exploitation. This is meditation. In fact, in view of our present level of spiritual development, this sort of approach to our practice can be even more precise and realistic than meditation on profound tantric subjects.

- A deep understanding of karma makes us conscientious in everything we do
- An hour's meditation is nothing compared to a day of sustained conscious awareness
- Being watchful of our actions and cultivating loving kindness should be our main practice

Karma

4 How to modify our actions

IT is very important to recognize how we've created all our own problems. Just understanding this is so important. We've created these problems because we've not been handling our body, speech and mind correctly. The result has been problems for ourselves and problems for others. We have confused ourselves and others for centuries, millennia, countless lives. It has been this way, it is this way and it will continue to be this way unless we renounce this cycle of suffering. When we are miserable, we make others miserable. When we are happy, we make others happy.

We have to feel incredulous when we realize the endlessness of all this confusion, and make a strong determination to clear it up: "If I truly love others, if I really have compassion for others, I must improve myself. I must better my behavior, my speech and my thinking. Without doing so, there's no way I can help others. I'm only dreaming if while saying that I want to help others, I merely perpetuate the disastrous actions of my uncontrolled body, speech and mind." That's the attitude we need if we want to help others in the best way we can.

We see the problems of the people we're with, but we don't see our own. We think we're pure. Such are the limitations of the samsaric mind. That's why I feel happy when we recognize that we need purification, that there is something we can do to improve our lives. I consider that to be some kind of realization. We recognize that since our own mind created the negative experiences we have, our own mind can counteract them. This is the main point.

- We've created our own problems by not handling our body, speech and mind correctly
- To be able to help others, we must make a strong determination to clear this confusion
- Recognizing that we need purification is a form of realization



As DHARMA students we might already be doing various purification practices as part of our commitments, but perhaps we're not doing them with much conviction because we feel we have not created much negative karma. Pabongka Dechen Nyingpo says that this is only because we have not thought well about the subject. From beginningless lives we have done every nonvirtue it is possible to do and accumulated imprints from every possible negative action. They are all on our mental continuum, just waiting to ripen.

The analogy I really like is waking up with a nest of cobras in our lap. Imagine! We certainly wouldn't be complacent. We would grab them and throw them as far away as we could. And yet the most those cobras can do is to bite us and make us die in agony. This is absolutely nothing compared to what the negative mind can do to us. The cobras do not have the power to send us to the lower realms, which is exactly what our negativities, even the small ones, do. When we have the same fear of even the smallest nonvirtue as we do of a cobra in our lap, then we can say that we have definite faith in karma.

Only by really understanding karma can we develop the strong conviction to purify. In fact, if we could truly see the results of our negative actions, we would want to do nothing but purify. If we gave proper thought to the immensity of nonvirtue already on our mental continuum—collected from beginningless lifetimes and being added to every day—then nothing but purification would interest us in the slightest. We would dedicate our whole life to purification.

- If we think we don't have much to purify, it's because we haven't thought well or deeply
- We should fear our negativities as much as we would fear a nest of cobras in our lap
- Only by really understanding karma can we develop the strong conviction to purify

OUR PRACTICE of purification cannot be perfect without the four opponent powers: *the power of the object, the power of regret, the power of resolve and the power of the remedy*. While any Dharma action purifies our negativities, integrating it with the practice of the four opponent powers makes it stronger. It becomes incredibly powerful.

Based on strong refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha (the object), we look at the negativities we have committed and have a genuine feeling of regret, reflecting on the shortcomings of creating negative karma. The more regret we are able to feel, the more powerful our purification becomes and the more negative karma and obscurations we purify. This naturally leads us to determine to not do such actions again—the third power of resolve. Based on this we do a purification practice such as reciting Vajrasattva mantras or doing prostrations. This is the power of the remedy. It does not have to be a specific practice, as long as we combine it with strong regret and resolve not to do the negative action again.

Each of the four opponent powers purifies a corresponding suffering result. The power of the object destroys the environmental result, the power of regret prevents our experiencing the result similar to the cause, the power of resolve prevents our creating the result similar to the cause and the power of the remedy destroys the ripening result. We can see now how unbelievably important it is that the practice of purification must be perfected through all four powers and not just one of them. This is the key; this is the real solution.

- The four opponent powers make any form of purification incredibly powerful
- They are the powers of the *object, regret, resolve* and the *remedy*
- All four powers are vital because each one purifies a corresponding suffering result

Karma

4 How to modify our actions

4.1 Purifying with the four powers



THERE ARE many ways to purify the mind but the lamrim texts usually list six. They are: prostrating and reciting the holy names of the buddhas such as the thirty-five confession buddhas, reciting purifying mantras such as the Vajrasattva mantra, making holy objects such as thangkas, statues and tsatsas, reciting *prajnaparamita* (perfection of wisdom) texts such as the *Heart Sutra* or the *Diamond Cutter Sutra*, meditating on emptiness, bodhicitta and similar subjects, and making offerings to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

Practices that create merit are a form of purification. Studying the Dharma, meditating, practicing generosity, even cleaning holy places—all the things that constitute our Dharma practice—contribute to freeing our mind from the delusions that currently weigh it down. Of the specific meditation practices designed to purify our mindstream quickly, Vajrasattva is considered supreme, but there are others that are very effective. The two-day *nyung nä* fasting retreat is an incredibly powerful practice. Based on prayers and prostrations to Chenrezig, the Compassion Buddha, by fasting and focusing on the suffering of others our mind is cleansed of self-cherishing. Whatever purification practice we do should be combined with taking refuge, and to be really effective we should utilize all four opponent powers.

Purifying powerfully and continually helps to prevent whatever negative karma we have committed from manifesting as suffering. Even though the negative karma we have created today is not completely purified by one action of purification, it will certainly be lessened. Therefore, it is incredibly worthwhile to make purification with the four powers a regular part of our Dharma practice.

- There are many ways to purify the mind but the lamrim texts usually list six
- In addition to the specific practices, any meritorious activity is a form of purification
- Purification with the four powers should be a regular part of our Dharma practice

Karma

4 How to modify our actions

4.2 Methods of purification

UNDERSTANDING the karmic connection between causes and effects will give us the energy to change ourselves. Nevertheless, it is essential to approach our practice with patience and wisdom. Changing our habitual behavior is not easy. It is not like making instant coffee; it takes time. Change occurs gradually because the various negative attitudes and delusions have different degrees of strength. Therefore, each mental problem must be treated according to its particular nature, be it extremely subtle and deeply embedded in our consciousness or quite evident and within reach.

The logical approach is to concentrate first on purifying gross negativities before attempting to root out the deeper subtle ones. The important point is that removing the more obvious faults is something we can do now. It is much wiser to work in an area where success is possible rather than to reach for the impossible. For example, when washing a dirty rag it is impossible to remove the stains and odors from it immediately. The initial washing might take care of the first layer of dirt, but only after it has been washed and wrung out two or three times have all the stains been finally removed. The root delusions—attachment, anger and ignorance—are the stains polluting our mind, and, of these, ignorance of reality is the most deeply ingrained and difficult to remove.

Of course, it is good to strive for perfection, but we must be practical. It is best to go by degrees, step by step. Otherwise we are likely to jump in too quickly and break our leg. To succeed in our Dharma practice it is best to be at ease, relaxed and down-to-earth and to adjust the intensity of our practice day by day, according to our situation.

- Changing our habitual behavior is a gradual process that demands patience and wisdom
- We should concentrate first on purifying gross negativities and removing obvious faults
- To succeed in our Dharma practice it's best to be relaxed and down-to-earth



AT PRESENT we suffer and don't know why. We fail to see that everything we experience, both good and bad, is the result of our own karma. We can't link the happy or miserable situation we are in with the positive or negative actions we have done in the past. Hence we blame external factors for our suffering and problems whereas they are entirely caused by our own mind.

Whatever others do to us is the direct result of what we have done to them in the past. We harmed them in this life or a previous one, therefore we are now receiving harm from them. When we harmed them we thought it was totally acceptable, totally justified, but now that we are on the receiving end we don't think that they should harm us. It is the dictator, our self-cherishing mind, telling us this. When we think about it, it is very strange that we find it acceptable to harm others but feel that they have no right to retaliate.

There is no enemy other than our own delusions. We have no reason to blame any other being; we have no reason to get angry with any other being. Anybody who is angry with us and tries to harm us should, in fact, be an object of compassion, because we have harmed them in the past and that is why they are harming us in this life. We are causing them to create bad karma by harming us. That other sentient being has no freedom at all. They are completely overwhelmed by ignorance, anger, attachment and past karma, and so must be an object of our compassion.

- We fail to see that all the suffering we experience is the result of our own karma
- Whatever others do to us is the direct result of what we have done to them in the past
- The only enemy is our delusions and there's no reason to get angry with any other being

WE ARE incredibly fortunate that we have met the teachings and have some idea of karma. Before this we stumbled along blindly, trying to be happy without any real idea of the causes of happiness and suffering and never really knowing why things went wrong, no matter what we did. Now we have the perfect, infallible route out of suffering. We can see that whatever happiness we experience is the result of virtuous actions we have done in the past and whatever suffering we experience comes from our previous nonvirtuous actions. When we see this clearly we know exactly what we need to do to correct the situation.

How amazing that is! Simply by recognizing karma and avoiding what leads to suffering, we have the knowledge of the root of all happiness at our fingertips, the means to transform any action into the cause of future happiness. Because of this we are incredibly free. We were never free before. We would try for happiness but our ignorance would lead us to the exact opposite result. Everything we did would be flawed. But now we can sow the seeds of happiness with every action. Understanding how incredibly free we are, we should feel great joy.

When we first learn about karma it might seem that because of our previous karma, everything we experience is predetermined and therefore we have no free will at all. In fact, it's only when we understand karma that we know how to transform our actions and liberate ourselves from the prison of samsara, the prison of suffering, the prison of delusions.

- To be ignorant of karma is to stumble blindly without knowing the way out of suffering
- Recognition of karma gives us freedom to sow the seeds of happiness with every action
- Only when we understand karma can we liberate ourselves from the prison of samsara



THERE IS a big difference between an intellectual understanding of karma and one based on the living experience of it. Some students have a word-perfect understanding of the teachings on karma and some superficial faith—“It must be true because my lama said so”—but because they do not have any experiential understanding of karma, when their understanding is tested they fail. They have no solution when serious problems arise. They are satisfied with being able to talk about karma, as if being able to tell their parents and friends all about it were enough, but they cannot do what they talk about because they haven’t practiced.

Other students, however, are not satisfied with the mere intellectual understanding but attempt to understand through practice what they have been taught. They may not be able to give extensive discourses on karma, but because they are always mindful of their actions, they get a true taste of Dharma, an experience as real as the sweetness of honey on our tongue. When problems arise for such practitioners, they know how to apply the solutions.

I am sure that most of us understand clearly how defiled actions of body, speech and mind are cyclic in nature, bringing the results of suffering, confusion and more defilement. In our mind there is no question about the truth of this. You can probably explain it much more clearly than I can. When you hear my broken English, you may think to yourselves, “What kind of language is that? If he’d let me talk, I could give a much better explanation.” All this is true. But why can’t we put a stop to our negative habits? Theoretical knowledge alone is not enough.

- There’s a big difference between intellectual and experiential understandings of karma
- Students who are mindful of their actions get a true taste of Dharma
- Theoretical knowledge alone is not enough to put a stop to our negative habits

A VERY GOOD meditation is to observe everything in our mind as a projection of our karma, as a mere karmic appearance. We can do this anywhere—while we are eating, walking, talking or working in the office—and we can do it at any time, even when sleeping.

Look at the flowers that we enjoy in the garden. We can look deeply at a flower and see how it is our own karmic appearance. We can look at the stem and the petals, at the unique design and the way the colors blend. We can really examine the flower, looking at how incredibly intricate it is. As we observe it, we should reflect on how what appears to us is a creation of our own mind, our own karma. This is very, very interesting. The fact that it appears beautiful to us is purely because of our karma. The mind is capable of doing such amazing things! Because of positive actions we have done in the past we have these propensities for happiness and the appreciation of beauty on our mindstream, and now that the conditions have come together, we can experience and enjoy the beauty of this flower.

We can use meditations like this to inspire us. Instead of feeling we are hopeless and incapable, we realize that if we have the ability to see such wonders, we can create any kind of world we like. It shows us how the mind can be developed and gives us encouragement to do this. We see we can take that all the way, by developing our mind until it is completely free of all delusions and we have achieved liberation and freedom from samsara and all suffering.

- A very good meditation is to observe everything in our mind as a karmic projection
- The happiness that we experience now is the result of our positive actions in the past
- Understanding our ability to create our own world will inspire and encourage us

WE MUST be practical. We should use our inner wisdom and just act! We should try to be reasonable in the way we grow and never think it is too late. It is never too late. Even if we are going to die tomorrow, we should keep ourselves straight and clear and be a happy human being today. If we keep our situation happy day by day, we will eventually reach the greatest happiness of enlightenment.

Remember, we are all responsible for our own lives. Don't think, "This Tibetan monk is going to give me enlightenment; this monk is going to make me powerful." It is not like that. Anyone who claims to be a Buddhist knows that the principal concern of Buddhism is the mind. The mind is the nucleus of samsara and nirvana. Every experience we have in our life manifests from our mind. Because we interpret our life and our world through our mental attitude, it is important to have the right motivation. Wrong motivation brings pain, disappointment and extremes in life.

Think like this: "For the rest of my life, it is my responsibility to grow in mindfulness and happiness. Each day I will expand the loving kindness I already have. When I wake up each morning I will open my wisdom-eye and see more and more deeply into the inner universal reality. I will try to be as mindful as possible. I will take responsibility for my life and dedicate it to others by growing strong in loving kindness and wisdom. I will serve others as much as possible." We should make the determination that this is going to be our way of life.

- If we keep our situation happy day by day we will eventually reach enlightenment
- Since the mind is the nucleus of samsara and nirvana, we need the right motivation
- We must determine to live with wisdom, mindfulness and compassion

BASED ON the perfect human rebirth, there are three levels of path within the lamrim, depending on the level of motivation of the practitioner. The graduated path of the lower capable being is for the person seeking only a better future rebirth. The topics within this scope include impermanence and death, the three lower realms, refuge and karma. What we will now be looking at are the teachings on the second level, the graduated path of the medium capable being, which is for those seeking not just a better future rebirth but also individual liberation from all suffering.

From the tiniest life form, seen only through the microscope, to the most famous person, somebody who maybe owns the whole earth, all living beings are conditioned by suffering. Perhaps the English word “suffering” means something very gross to us, but somehow, “suffering” doesn’t quite convey the whole flavor of the original term, which in Pali is *dukkha*. *Dukkha* means suffering, but suffering at all levels. Perhaps we can use the word “dissatisfaction.” What it really means is having an uncontrolled mind.

Until we break the chain of cause and effect that traps us in samsara, we will continue to suffer for lifetime after lifetime after lifetime. There is no end to samsara without purifying even the most subtle delusions that sit on our mind-stream. This requires understanding that samsaric pleasures are nothing other than suffering and having the strength to turn our back on them. Until we have the feeling that whatever is in samsara—whether it is the most terrible suffering of the hells or the divine pleasure of the gods—is a blazing fire that will consume us, there is no way to attain liberation and enlightenment. This is why we must understand suffering in all its manifestations.

- A medium capable being seeks liberation from all suffering
- All living beings are conditioned by suffering, which means having an uncontrolled mind
- We need to realize that the sufferings of samsara are a blazing fire that will consume us

The sufferings of samsara

DAY 210 SUFFERING IS NOT FOUND IN EXTERNAL OBJECTS—
IT IS OUR IGNORANT MIND THAT IS MISERABLE
—LAMA YESHE

BUDDHISM ALWAYS talks about suffering. This turns some Westerners off: “We’re happy; we’re not suffering; what’s our problem? Why should we listen to teachings on suffering?” Well, we can think that way if we like, but in fact, if we check more deeply into how our mind functions in everyday life, we’ll realize how dissatisfied we are and how up and down our uncontrolled mind actually is. That up and down itself is suffering, that’s all. It’s very simple.

When Lord Buddha talked about suffering he didn’t mean simply physical pain, like toothaches, headaches and so forth. Those kinds of suffering are very temporary; they’re nothing. But if we check within ourselves, whether we’re rich or poor, famous or unknown, we’ll always find dissatisfaction, a kind of uncontrollable, ever-changing energy of dislike. That energy too is suffering. From the beginning of human evolution on this earth up to now, people have constantly sought something worthwhile, pleasure and happiness, in many different ways. But most of their methods have been completely wrong. They’ve sought happiness here while all the time it’s been over there, in exactly the opposite direction. We’re educated—we can check historically what people have believed through the ages and how they’ve sought fulfillment in different ways. We can see. Most times they’ve gone in totally the wrong direction.

So now people are finally beginning to realize that happiness is not dependent upon external development or material wealth. These days we don’t even need a lama to explain it to us because the manifest world itself demonstrates the up and down nature of mundane reality—socially, economically and in many other ways. As a result, people are now beginning to investigate better ways of achieving a happy and joyful life.

- If we think we aren’t suffering, we should take a look at our uncontrolled mind
- Suffering isn’t just physical pain—it’s also our ever-present energy of dissatisfaction
- People now realize that they’ve been seeking happiness in all the wrong places

The sufferings of samsara

THE FIRST teaching that Guru Shakyamuni Buddha gave after he attained enlightenment was on the four noble truths. The first of these is the truth of suffering, which the Buddha says must be understood. The second noble truth is the cause of suffering, which he says must be abandoned, or renounced. The third is the cessation of suffering, which is to be attained by means of the fourth noble truth—the path leading to the cessation of suffering, which must be practiced. In this vital teaching he lays out the entire Buddhist path, from where we are now all the way to the state of complete awakening that we call liberation.

To renounce suffering, we must know what it is and understand its cause. If a doctor were to give us some medicine but not explain what our illness was, we would see no purpose in taking the medicine. This is why the Buddha explained the truth of suffering first, followed by its cause. When we know how we are suffering and what its cause is, we will ask whether it is curable. This is the third truth—the fact that we can overcome all suffering and become truly free, or liberated. Then we eagerly seek a remedy—the medicine—which corresponds to the fourth noble truth, the truth of the path to enlightenment, which is the entire Dharma, the way out of suffering.

The Buddha saw that what we needed first was to understand the extent of our suffering so that we would have the wish to be free from it. Only then would we have the energy to do whatever is necessary to be free.

- In his teaching on the four noble truths the Buddha laid out the entire path
- When we understand our illness and its cause, we eagerly seek a cure
- The Buddha saw that first of all we need to recognize the extent of our suffering



ESCAPING SAMSARA does not depend on escaping to another country or leaving this planet or even the galaxy. We can't escape samsara just by going somewhere else. Samsara is not something that is outside our mind. We can go to the moon but we'll be taking our samsara with us. Even when we die we take our samsara with us. We might be on the softest bed with the most attentive helpers all around us, but that won't free us from samsara. At death, we leave our body, but our mind brings our samsara along wherever it goes. Our body may be burnt to ash, but our mind is still in samsara. In the intermediate state we are still in samsara, as we are when we take our next rebirth, whether as a hell being or a divine god.

If neither our possessions nor our environment are samsara, then what is samsara? These five aggregates that we call "me" are samsara. It is more than just our body; our physical form is just one part. The other four aggregates—the mental constituents of feeling, discrimination, compositional factors and consciousness—are also samsara. These five aggregates are samsara because they are bound by delusion and karma and therefore they are bound to circle in cyclic existence—samsara—forever, unless we can break completely free by attaining liberation or enlightenment.

Until we are liberated from the suffering of samsara, everything we do is in the nature of suffering. As long as our aggregates are contaminated by ignorance, whenever one of our senses meets an object, delusion arises, motivating a karmic action that leaves a negative imprint that sooner or later results in suffering. This is a story that repeats itself a million times a day.

- There is no easy escape from samsara: it's inside our mind and with us wherever we go
- Our five aggregates are samsara because they are bound by delusion and karma
- Until we are liberated, everything we do will be in the nature of suffering

The sufferings of samsara

1 The six general types of suffering



NOTHING is definite in samsara. There is nothing that we can say with certainty will last. Every relationship we have with a being or with an inanimate object will change and cannot last. Relationships with people change and end, possessions change and end. Even this body will let us down.

This is a very simple thing to understand. We just have to look around to see that this is exactly how it is. We wake up in a happy mood but by mid-morning we are unhappy; we cheer up at lunchtime but something happens in the afternoon that upsets us. Seeing a poor person, we have no way of knowing whether that person was rich before; when we meet somebody with a good reputation, perhaps even a year ago that person had been criticized and blamed for many things. Nothing is definite. Everything changes.

If we could see relationships as a constantly changing dance, we would see that nothing can last. Once the clairvoyant arhat Shariputra was going for alms in the town near a family's home. When he looked through the door of a house he saw that the former father of the household was now a fish that had been caught by the son and was being eaten by the family; that the former mother was now a dog at the son's feet, chewing the bones of her former husband; and that the former son was cradling his former hated enemy, who had been reborn as his child, and beating the dog, his mother, with a stick. "Eating the father's flesh, beating the mother, cuddling the enemy—how samsara makes me laugh," he said.

- Nothing is definite in samsara: our relationships, possessions and body do not last
- Simply watching our mind or looking around us shows how everything changes
- The clairvoyant Shariputra saw how family members swapped places from life to life

The sufferings of samsara

1 The six general types of suffering

1.1 Nothing is definite in samsara

THE MAIN problem we all have is the suffering that comes from not attaining our various desires. These include the obvious physical necessities of food and clothing as well as such enjoyable things as a good reputation, the sound of pleasant and comforting words and the like. Some forms of suffering, such as the hunger of an extremely impoverished person, are more obvious than others. But in one way or another, we all hunger uncontrollably for things we do not possess.

Take the example of someone who is fortunate enough to be born into a wealthy family. During their lifetime, they may never experience material want. They can afford to buy anything that arouses their desire and are free to travel wherever they please, experiencing the various delights and excitement offered by different cultures. When they finally reach the point at which there is nothing left to possess, no place left to visit and no pleasure left to experience, they will still suffer from an acute feeling of dissatisfaction. In such a restless, dissatisfied state of mind, many people go insane, unable to cope with this intense and pervasive suffering.

Thus, even when there is no lack of material comfort, there is still suffering. In fact, it often happens that possession of material wealth increases dissatisfaction, because it then becomes even more obvious that such possessions have no ability whatsoever to affect or cut through the root of suffering. There is still the continuity of dissatisfaction, confusion, worry and the rest. If the accumulation of external comforts really were able to eliminate suffering, then at some point suffering would be severed and all dissatisfaction would cease. But as long as our mind is tied up with an uncontrolled body, suffering continues.

- Our main problem is the suffering that comes from not attaining our various desires
- Even those with no material needs can suffer from an acute feeling of dissatisfaction
- Suffering will continue for as long as our mind is tied up with an uncontrolled body

The sufferings of samsara

1 The six general types of suffering

1.2 Nothing gives satisfaction in samsara

HAVING TO take rebirth without choice in a samsaric body means that we also have to separate from that body without choice. Death happens without choice, separating from our body happens without choice, and rebirth happens without choice. This is one of the sufferings of samsara. We have taken a human body, and the body of every kind of animal, god, demigod, hungry ghost and hell being, and have had to leave them countless times.

Like all samsaric pleasures, even the incredibly long and luxurious life of a desire realm god must end, because nothing is definite. When that happens the beautiful palaces made of jewels will be replaced by a burning iron house without doors or windows, the divine nectar that is their food will become molten lava poured down their throat, the wonderfully soft ground of lapis lazuli will become a field of razor-sharp knives, and the beautiful boy and girl gods who played with them will become fearsome karmically-created hell protectors with hideous animal heads, whose one job is to torment. The palaces radiating great light like the sun and moon become a realm of utter blackness, where the former god can't even see their own body.

Whatever kind of body we have in this life, we must leave it. The most beautiful body will end and therefore there is nothing to trust in this samsaric life. Even in this life it changes, and then, at death, we lose it completely. We have this body for the briefest moment and then it is gone. Because of that, there is no reason to have any attachment at all, even to our closest possession, our body.

- Without choice, we have had to leave every kind of samsaric body countless times
- Even a desire realm god will eventually die and be reborn in the hell realms
- We have this body for the briefest moment, so there's no reason to be attached to it

The sufferings of samsara

1 The six general types of suffering

1.3 We have to repeatedly leave this samsaric body



ANOTHER SHORTCOMING of samsara is that after leaving a body we have to take rebirth again. Leaving one body, we take another, joining with the fertilized egg in the mother's womb. This life's mother gave us this body, just as the previous life's mother gave us our last body. And before that there was another mother, and another and another and another, back and back and back, like those mirrors that reflect other mirrors on and on indefinitely.

Think of each being in each of the realms and of each experience they have in their entire lives. We have had such bodies countless times. Each of those samsaric bodies has been subject to suffering, much of it absolutely terrible, and thus it is said that if we could collect all the tears we have ever shed, they would fill all the oceans, in fact the whole universe. All the red-hot metal we have been forced to drink as a hell being would fill the oceans. If we collected all the milk we have ever drunk from our mothers' breasts it would fill all of space.

If we heaped up all the heads of the beings we have killed in battle, the pile would be bigger than the whole world. The pile of all the garbage we have eaten as pigs, dogs, carrion and other beings would be bigger than Mount Meru, the king of the mountains. And of course, the pile of all the garbage we will have to eat unless we can get out of samsara will be just as huge. The kaka we have eaten as worms, if it was collected, would fill the Pacific. When we consider this, it is quite unbearable.

- Since beginningless time, every time we have left a body we have taken rebirth again
- Each of our samsaric bodies has been subject to suffering, much of it terrible
- The scale of our suffering is unimaginable and will continue until we escape samsara

The sufferings of samsara

1 The six general types of suffering

1.4 We have to take rebirth again and again



ALWAYS CHANGING bodies, always changing status, we just don't know what we will be in samsara. Numberless times we have been kings, sitting on jeweled thrones commanding great armies, and numberless times we have fallen from that great status to some miserable existence in the lower realms. Numberless times we have lived in complete luxury only to leave that for a life of complete suffering in realms so terrible we can't even imagine them.

There is no experience that we haven't had in samsara; there is nothing left that we have yet to experience. We might see a film star with a mansion and a huge yacht and be envious, but we have been in that position countless times, and how has it helped us? We might think that ruling a country, with millions of people doing exactly as we wish, would be an entirely new experience, but we have ruled more countries than there are stars in the sky.

Samsaric pleasure cannot be increased and it never lasts. If we want it, we must work for it every time, and because of that our effort to attain happiness has been fruitless and endless. We chase an object, obtain it and then lose it, and all that great effort has been wasted. Many people dream of a life filled with beautiful possessions, expensive cars, fashionable clothes and the best food and work incredibly hard to get those things, bringing themselves such suffering. But even if they do manage to gain the life they dreamed of, it's just a dream. Like a dream, it lasts for only the briefest moment and then it is gone.

- We have fallen from extraordinary luxury to terrible suffering numberless times
- We have had every kind of experience in samsara and none of it has helped us
- Even if people manage to gain their dream life, it lasts a brief moment and then it is gone

The sufferings of samsara

1 The six general types of suffering

1.5 We forever travel from high to low in samsara

WE ARE born alone and we die alone. There is nobody else who can share our suffering at these times. We have created the karma to endure this suffering and we must do so. There is nobody to help us through conception, in our mother's womb or when we're being born. There is nobody who can help us through the death process and into the intermediate state. Although we might be surrounded by friends and family at our death, we are completely on our own for the actual process.

Even in life, whatever troubles we have must be experienced alone. Nobody can lift that karma from us and experience it on our behalf. When we have diarrhea we can't ask our best friend to have it for us. When we have a headache we can't get rid of it by handing it to another person.

Another name for this suffering is the suffering of not having helpers. At death, the consciousness leaves the body like a hair pulled out of butter, taking nothing with it. Just as we leave our body behind, we leave all our possessions and friends behind. Our friends can't accompany us or help us in any other way. Even the most powerful person on earth, with thousands and thousands of attendants and billions of subjects who would die for them, will die totally alone. None of those attendants, none of those subjects, none of those doctors and none of that wealth and power—nothing accompanies the consciousness on its journey to the next life.

- We are born alone and die alone: nobody else can share our suffering at these times
- Even in life, we experience our problems alone
- At death, we leave not only our body but all our possessions and friends behind

The sufferings of samsara

1 The six general types of suffering

1.6 We experience pain and death alone



WHEN WE meditate on the six types of suffering it is important that we draw a firm conclusion. Seeing that nothing is definite in samsara, that nothing has the ability to give us satisfaction and that due to not realizing this we jump from one samsaric body to another endlessly, we must make the determination to do whatever we can to break this cycle and never be deceived by the false lure of samsaric perfections.

If we don't make the commitment to persist in our meditations on the suffering of samsara and the other lamrim topics, we won't bring our understanding to a level where it affects our life. Hence we will always be controlled by attachment and the other delusions. Our understanding will remain as dry words rather than as a feeling in our heart. We need both a firm intellectual understanding based on in-depth study of the lamrim and a strong meditation practice that takes our understanding beyond the intellect to actual experience. As we progress we will find that understanding enhances our meditation and our meditation enhances our understanding. At first it may be quite difficult but it gets easier and easier.

The false sense that relationships can be stable, permanent and satisfactory; the false promise that possessions can give lasting happiness; the deceptive reliance on a body as a source of sensory pleasures—we need to see the trap for what it is and not be deceived. Then when friend becomes enemy, when possessions let us down and when it is time to leave this body, we will cope without worry or fear. We will see that we are not being separated from real, permanent happiness but from the source of suffering.

- When we meditate on the six types of suffering, we must determine to break the cycle
- Combining intellectual understanding with meditation takes us beyond dry words
- We need to see the trap of samsara for what it is and not be deceived

The sufferings of samsara

1 The six general types of suffering

THERE ARE sufferings that are general to all samsaric beings and sufferings that are specific to beings of the fortunate upper realms. Without investigating, we assume that the very rich are happy and the very poor are miserable and therefore attachment to comfort and wealth and aversion to discomfort and poverty arise in our mind. However, when we explore the six and eight types of suffering we start to see that it is all suffering, and thus we can break the bonds that keep us trapped.

I sometimes feel sad when I see the other passengers stowing their carry-on luggage in the overhead bins at the start of a flight, all excited because they are traveling off to different countries and getting away from their jobs and daily problems for a short while. It's easy to see that they have no real idea of life and the past karma to which they are chained or that what they are doing is not escaping from suffering but binding themselves to it with yet more ropes of delusion and karma.

They have no idea of reality, of what causes suffering or of what needs to be done to break free from suffering. Everything they do, at work or on vacation, is motivated by nonvirtue and will lead to suffering. If working is working for nonvirtue and holidaying is holidaying for nonvirtue, then what is the difference? Thinking like this makes it very easy to develop compassion for all beings—including the poorest and the wealthiest, the person stuck in an office and the holidaymaker lying on a tropical beach.

- The eight sufferings of the human realm show that suffering affects both rich or poor
- Most people have no idea of life, karma, what causes suffering or how to break free of it
- It's easy to develop compassion for beings with such ignorance of reality

The sufferings of samsara

2 The sufferings of the upper realms

2.1 The eight types of human suffering

WE DO not usually think about the sufferings connected with conception and birth, but they are very real nonetheless. Because the mother's mind and that of the baby are not the same, even she cannot fully appreciate the mental unrest of the being within her womb. But the fetus is in a situation that causes much mental and physical discomfort.

This small being feels trapped inside a narrow space that is too tight to allow much freedom. Sudden movements by the mother can cause much distress, as can foods that are either too hot, cold or spicy. The baby is confined close to foul-smelling wastes and can be disturbed by the unpredictable functioning of the mother's digestive and respiratory systems. These sufferings might not be obvious enough for most of us to discern, but the traumatic experience of birth itself is easily recognizable. When the time comes for the infant to be expelled from the womb, it is subjected to pressures far more severe than anything it has previously known. As the baby moves slowly through the birth canal, it feels as though it were being crushed between two rocks.

This intense suffering does not cease once the actual birth is completed. The baby's skin is so sensitive that even the warm air of the delivery room seems cold and harsh. The infant may be wrapped in a blanket made of the finest quality wool, but it still feels as though it is being scratched by thorns. In addition to these obvious physical sufferings, it often sees mentally created visions which are as terrifying as those sometimes viewed at the time of death. Thus, when we see a newborn baby we should not think it is crying for no reason.

- We don't usually think about the mental and physical sufferings of conception and birth
- After being trapped in the womb, the baby has a painful journey through the birth canal
- The intense suffering continues after birth, so it's no surprise that newborn babies cry

The sufferings of samsara

2 The sufferings of the upper realms

2.1 The eight types of human suffering

2.1.1 The suffering of birth



ALTHOUGH AGING begins the moment after conception, this suffering relates primarily to the time when we realize we are becoming old, when we realize that our body is not immortal and that it is already starting to let us down by getting sick and losing its strength and energy. We find we need glasses and can't hear well any more. With the decline in the functioning of our sense faculties we start to lose our enjoyment of sense objects and to feel the reality of death.

In our youth, our body is full of energy and health. Our skin is firm and our hair is thick and a good color. Then comes the terrible day when we look in the mirror and there is the first gray hair. Of course, we have always been getting older, but now we have visual proof. And slowly other signs come. Our body gets thinner and wrinkles appear. That face we thought of as so beautiful loses its beauty, with more and more gray hairs and more and more wrinkles. Soon our skin looks like an ill-fitting suit.

If we are not yet old, it is a very good meditation to think about what this will be like. Think about never doing anything without pain, of being too weak to pick things up or to walk more than a few paces, of being unable to see or hear clearly. Think of being utterly reliant on others for everything—for the food we eat and for being bathed and dressed. When we are old, every day is a reminder of the shortening of our life and how we are losing more and more of our strength, vitality, sense faculties and ability to function.

- The suffering of aging relates primarily to the time when we realize we're getting old
- Our youthful body, full of energy and health, slowly becomes older and weaker
- If we are not yet old, it's very good to reflect now on what this experience will be like

The sufferings of samsara

2 The sufferings of the upper realms

2.1 The eight types of human suffering

2.1.2 The suffering of aging

WHEN WE get old, we invariably get sick. Sickness is an inseparable companion of old age. But even if we aren't old, there are many, many illnesses and pains that we have to experience. I think everybody will agree that sickness is a suffering we all want to avoid.

With any illness, our body changes. With a cold, our nose runs; with high blood pressure, our face goes red. Due to other illnesses we lose our beauty and our skin becomes yellowish and dead, we get lumps on the skin or inside our body, we get fevers and sweat, we vomit and shiver. Besides the physical pain and discomfort an illness inflicts on us, there is the mental worry. We are unable to think properly and our life becomes nothing but this illness. When we are sick, we are unable to enjoy things. We can no longer go to places we like or eat food we enjoy, and because of our attachment to sense pleasures we suffer. Nobody likes to take medicine, yet we might be forced to take dozens of pills each day with unpleasant side effects. Perhaps we need x-rays or chemotherapy. It sometimes seems that the cure is worse than the illness. Finally, whenever we have a serious illness we live in fear that we could die.

Whether we live or die does not entirely depend on the skill of the surgeon or the efficacy of the medicine. If we have created the karma to die from that illness, we will, and if we have created the karma not to die, we won't. If we weren't controlled by delusion and karma we wouldn't have had to face that illness in the first place.

- Although nobody wants to be sick, we all have to experience many illnesses and pains
- Our body changes, we can't enjoy life, we endure unpleasant things and fear we'll die
- Illness is not under our control but is under the control of delusion and karma

The sufferings of samsara

2 The sufferings of the upper realms

2.1 The eight types of human suffering

2.1.3 The suffering of sickness



ONE DAY, for sure, death will happen. Life ends and there is death—it's as simple as that—and there is nothing we can do. No matter how much fear we have, no matter how much we regret not having practiced Dharma and developed a good heart, death will happen. Whether we believe in reincarnation or not, we will die. Whether or not we have prepared for death, we will die. The person we have thought of as “me” and have cherished for so long will cease to exist, and the subtle consciousness will leave the useless body to take another life.

Death will happen no matter what we want or need. And when we die, we leave everything behind. All the possessions we have collected in our lifetime—all our friends, family, relatives, colleagues, competitors, enemies and even our body—will cease to exist for us as we separate from the corpse and move to our next rebirth. Therefore we have great suffering at death, leaving all we have known behind. The more attached we are to our possessions, friends, family and body, the greater the suffering.

No matter how much fear we have, there is no method to overcome it unless we have integrated the Dharma into our lives. At the time of death, even if we only believe in one life and have no understanding of karma, we will experience a great fear of what will happen to us and have no time to prepare for it. If we die with a negative mind, we can experience fearful karmic visions and hear terrible sounds, portents of our future suffering life. Overcome with terror, our mind still has to leave the body. This can definitely happen to us.

- Whatever our fears, regrets and beliefs, death will definitely happen one day
- When we die, we are separated from our possessions, family, friends and our body
- Unless the Dharma is integrated into our life, we will experience great fear and suffering

The sufferings of samsara

2 The sufferings of the upper realms

2.1 The eight types of human suffering

2.1.4 The suffering of death



OUT OF the whole universe, we choose one atom—one girlfriend or one boyfriend—one tiny bit of energy, and say, “I love you.” With much attachment we put an enormous amount of energy into this one concrete object and thus from the beginning automatically set ourselves up for conflict. By building up such tremendously powerful attachment we create within ourselves a psychological atomic bomb. Our internal energy is so dependent upon this external object—this girl, this boy, whatever it is—that when it moves we shake. Our mind shakes; our life shakes.

However, this external object is impermanent; by nature, it's constantly changing, changing, changing. But the character of attachment is that it doesn't want things to change; it wants things to stay as they are. So when they do change, great worry and paranoia arise within us. And when the time comes to separate from our object of attachment through death or any other reason, we feel, “My life is over.” Of course, that's not true; we can see how attachment exaggerates: “Now I have no life.” Before, we have life; now suddenly we don't? Can you believe it? But that shows us what a totally overestimating, exaggerating mind the basic conception of attachment actually is. There's no way our pleasure can depend upon another atom; that's impossible, the materialistic way of thinking. The whole thing's completely wrong.

We can see in the world today how people worry about losing others. People worry, “My wife is going to die; my boyfriend is going to run out on me; my girlfriend is going to disappear.” All this worry comes from attachment, excessive concern for one's own pleasure. Ironically, even though we call it pleasure, it's not actual pleasure.

- Our attachment to external objects creates a psychological atomic bomb within us
- When these external objects inevitably change, great worry and paranoia arise
- We live in fear of separation from what we mistakenly consider objects of pleasure

The sufferings of samsara

2 The sufferings of the upper realms

2.1 The eight types of human suffering

2.1.5 The suffering of separation from what is pleasant

WE NOT only suffer from being unable to find the things we like but also from meeting with things we dislike. All our contact with enemies, bad food, unpleasant situations and the like brings us much distress, mental as well as physical. This type of suffering causes us great confusion throughout our life.

Discontent and dissatisfaction prevent us from having any peace. No matter how much we possess, we desire still more. We work and scheme, planning new ways of acquiring objects as if we were going to live forever, or at least for several centuries. Think of what we do merely to take care of this body of ours! We spend our life's energy in so many ways. We worry about keeping our body safe from hunger, cold, sickness, attack, and, finally, death. Our life is a constant struggle to keep out of danger, and we virtually sell ourselves into slavery to accomplish this aim. We may hide this fact of life from ourselves, but deep inside we can see that all this activity is in the very nature of suffering.

Although we work for many years to gain security, if the slightest circumstance in our life changes, we quickly fall ill or experience some other misfortune. It is so difficult to find protection, yet so easy to be miserable. Even when we are fortunate enough to achieve those things that normally make this life more comfortable and rewarding, they are often only another source of pain. For example, we may save up enough money to take a vacation only to become involved in a terrible accident. Or we may go out to an expensive restaurant and end up with food poisoning. In such ways, suffering comes without choice.

- Encountering things and people we dislike, such as enemies, is a source of suffering
- Our life is a constant and fruitless struggle to acquire things and keep out of danger
- Even the things that make life comfortable often become an extra source of pain

The sufferings of samsara

2 The sufferings of the upper realms

2.1 The eight types of human suffering

2.1.6 The suffering of encountering what is unpleasant

FROM THE moment we wake up until the moment we fall asleep at night, and even throughout our dreams, we are driven by desire. Each of our senses is hungry for its own particular food. Our eye craves to see interesting shapes and colors; our ear wants to hear pleasing sounds; our nose actively sniffs out agreeable odors and turns away in disgust from smells that offend it; our tongue seeks exciting new tastes; and our sense of touch is forever craving contact of one kind or another.

Behind all our desires is the wish to be happy. In this respect everyone is exactly equal, for we all want happiness—even though we may define it differently—and none of us wishes even the slightest suffering or disappointment. If we check up carefully we can see that all our actions are motivated by either the desire to experience what is pleasurable or the desire to avoid experiencing the unpleasant.

Yet in spite of all our wishes to have nothing but happiness, our life is full of pain and dissatisfaction. Our prize possession that we worked so hard for either breaks, is lost or stolen, or simply ceases to give us pleasure. Our loving husband or wife soon becomes our worst enemy or dies and leaves us forlorn. The job we covet turns into a heavy burden that consumes all our time and energy. In all these ways, then, desired happiness eludes our grasp. Sometimes it seems that the more we try to be happy, the more miserable we become. From this point of view, life seems to be a meaningless rat race; our efforts to find happiness lead us around in circles until we end up frustrated and exhausted.

- We are driven by desire from the moment we wake until we fall asleep at night
- We all want happiness and to avoid the slightest suffering or disappointment
- Our life is full of pain and dissatisfaction, and happiness eludes our grasp

The sufferings of samsara

2 The sufferings of the upper realms

2.1 The eight types of human suffering

2.1.7 The suffering of not getting what we want



THE LAST of the eight types of suffering is the fact that we have this body and mind created by delusion and karma and therefore we are forever tied to suffering. The needs of this samsaric body and deluded mind will endlessly demand that we create negative karma, and because of that we suffer. Therefore, we can see these five aggregates as five pots filled with all the sufferings of the past, present and future. They are the product of past suffering, they are the experiencers of present suffering and they are the creators of future suffering.

Because we have negative karmic imprints on our mental continuum we create the causes for future suffering, and because we have been born due to delusion and karma, our body and mind are instruments of suffering, bringing us old age, sickness, death and the many mental pains we must experience. The suffering of aging commences as soon as we are conceived and ends in the suffering of death. In between conception and death, because of these five deluded aggregates we experience all the other forms of suffering that we have looked at. This suffering of conditioned existence exists because this body exists. We are born in the nature of suffering and we decay and perish in the nature of suffering.

Whatever samsaric body we take in the six realms is only in the nature of suffering. There is no opportunity to experience even a moment of true happiness, and even finding temporal pleasure is difficult. The load of suffering that we carry about all the time can be visualized as a huge lump of red-hot iron that is oneness with fire, chained to our back forever. We carry it wherever we go.

- We are forever tied to suffering by this body and mind created by delusion and karma
- Our five deluded aggregates are instruments of suffering from conception up to death
- Wherever we go, we carry a load of suffering like a lump of red-hot iron on our back

The sufferings of samsara

2 The sufferings of the upper realms

2.1 The eight types of human suffering

2.1.8 The suffering of having deluded aggregates



THERE ARE REALMS BEYOND THE HUMAN REALM
THAT HAVE PLEASURES WE COULD NEVER DREAM
OF, BUT THEY ARE STILL SUFFERING
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

As far as pleasure is concerned, the demigods are higher than humans, but lower than the gods. Demigods look like gods in that they have magnificent bodies and beautiful clothes, but their beauty cannot be compared to that of the gods. Nor can the power they have—which is vastly more than any human—be compared with the power of the gods.

Possessing so much but possessing so little compared to the gods above them is the thing that rules their lives. Seeing the incredible luxury of the gods drives the demigods crazy with jealousy. It is like a thorn stabbing into their hearts. The beauty of their own wives seems inferior to the incredible beauty of the goddesses of the god realm and therefore they fight with the gods. They see the gods passing their whole life in pleasure, always playing, distractedly enjoying themselves in beautiful parks, surrounded by their many hundreds of wives, and they determine that they must have all this. Because of that, the demigods are constantly at war with the gods, using very powerful weapons, but it is a war that is impossible to win because of the vastly superior power and ability of the gods.

Perhaps we might be drawn to the life of a demigod with its amazing luxury and fabulous possessions, but it is really a very miserable existence, full of jealousy, miserliness and war. Demigods are considered lower than humans, not because of their level of comfort but because of their state of mind. They might have a degree of intelligence, but they can never understand the nature of reality or develop altruism.

- Demigods experience more pleasure than humans, but less than the gods
- Driven crazy by jealousy of the incredible luxury of the gods, they are constantly at war
- In this miserable existence they can never understand reality or develop altruism

The sufferings of samsara

2 The sufferings of the upper realms

2.2 The sufferings of the demigods

THE GREAT enjoyment experienced by the desire realm gods is due to the positive karma they have accumulated during past lives. Unfortunately, all they can do in the god realm is experience the ripening of that positive karma. Too distracted to think of anything but pleasure, they are unable to create any new positive karma. Thus, when they have used up all that positive karma, they must then experience great suffering.

Being born as a form realm god depends on renouncing the desire realm entirely and perfecting all nine stages of calm abiding to attain deep meditative absorption. In this state, the mind can remain single-pointedly on an object, free from all discursive thought. This is a worldly path and not the path to enlightenment, although the attainment of calm abiding is the same for both paths. A form realm god has aversion to samsaric sense pleasures but unfortunately not to the whole of samsara, and sees the peace of meditative absorption as true peace and happiness.

There is no way a being can develop bodhicitta and the wisdom realizing emptiness while meditating on nothingness. Rather than cultivating wisdom, thinking of nothing just cultivates ignorance, which results in a grosser rebirth. It can be even worse. When the formless realm gods are dying and realize they are about to be reborn in the lower realms, they can remember what led them to the pinnacle of samsara. They think that all their great effort has been to no avail and that there is no such thing as liberation, thus causing heresy to arise in their mind, which results in rebirth in the hell realm.

- Rebirth in the god realm uses up all our positive karma and leads to great suffering
- Form realm gods have perfected samadhi but are not on the path to enlightenment
- Meditating on nothingness simply cultivates ignorance and leads to a grosser rebirth

The sufferings of samsara

2 The sufferings of the upper realms

2.3 The sufferings of the god realms

IN THE *Four Noble Truths Sutra*, the Buddha explains suffering in many ways—as six types, as eight types and so forth—but the main division of suffering is into three: *the suffering of suffering*, *the suffering of change* and *pervasive compounding suffering*. All the Buddha's teachings on suffering are condensed into these three. When we understand these three, we can easily see how the whole ocean of samsaric suffering fits into these three levels of suffering.

Pervasive compounding suffering is the foundation for the other two sufferings. The suffering of suffering and the suffering of change are like bubbles rising to the surface of the water of pervasive compounding suffering. Just as water produces bubbles, pervasive compounding suffering produces all our suffering. Living with the seed of delusion, our actions give rise to further delusion and more negative imprints on our continuum, which in turn will result in further suffering. This is the endless cycle we are trapped in. This is reality, just as the Buddha explained it; nothing has been made up, nothing has been exaggerated. With his omniscience, the Buddha saw the nature of reality and saw that this is how we beings in samsara suffer. This is exactly what he described.

Without contemplating the suffering of the whole of samsara, we think only of the suffering of suffering as something to be avoided. When we know that even the other two types of suffering trap us in samsara and eventually lead to the suffering of suffering, then we will naturally seek to be free from all suffering, including the suffering of change and pervasive compounding suffering.

- The *Four Noble Truths Sutra* condenses all the teachings on suffering into three types
- Pervasive compounding suffering is the foundation for the other two sufferings
- When we understand all three levels of suffering we will naturally seek to be free

THE SUFFERING of suffering is something that we all recognize and want to be free from. Humans recognize it, animals recognize it and hungry ghosts and hell beings recognize it. This level of suffering comprises all the gross and subtle physical and mental pain and anguish that we long to be rid of. Whatever we have aversion to is the suffering of suffering.

We only have to read a newspaper or watch the television news to see that a huge number of our fellow humans are experiencing terrible suffering. Wars, famines, droughts, floods and other natural disasters affect much of the world, and there are more people starving than living with enough to eat. Even among the privileged few who have a good standard of living, mental suffering blocks any chance of real happiness. The millionaire is beset with worries about security for themselves and their possessions and about the in-fighting of those who want what they own. Beggars have their problems, just as the rich have theirs. Football players on television have their problems, as do the fans who are watching them. Both circus performers and their audiences have their problems, as do politicians and their voters. We can't look at any aspect of any society without seeing a vast ocean of problems.

When we understand the suffering of suffering, reading a newspaper becomes a meditation to develop the mind renouncing samsara. Watching television, going outside on the street, seeing the problems of others—all this becomes a meditation on the suffering of suffering. Everything we see becomes a teaching on the shortcomings of samsara, showing us clearly that this is not ultimate happiness and that we need to develop renunciation of the whole of samsara.

- We all recognize and want to be free from the suffering of suffering
- Whatever aspect of society we look at, we will see a vast ocean of problems
- Once we understand this, simply reading a newspaper inspires us to renounce samsara

The sufferings of samsara
3 The three types of suffering
3.1 The suffering of suffering

LAMA TSONGKHAPA said, “Wherever you are in samsara, you never have happiness.” It sounds depressing, doesn’t it? What he meant was that the self-existent pleasurable experiences we think to be happiness are not really happiness, and he gave the following example:

When we are hungry we are suffering, and if we don’t eat, our hunger grows and our hunger pains get bigger and bigger. Then, when we begin to eat, the hungry feeling stops and we register that as happiness. We call eating happiness, but what is really making us happy is the fact that we are stopping the suffering of hunger. The cessation of the strong feeling of hunger is why we say, “Now I am happy, now I am comfortable.” Do you think that is happiness? Just stopping the strong hungry feeling, is that real happiness or not? That’s the question.

Lama Tsongkhapa gave these simple, very down-to-earth examples. We should have a down-to-earth understanding rather than just spacing out. He said that when we are hungry and begin to eat, the initial pleasure of eating will actually lead to pain; the pain of being too full. Doesn’t this make sense? It does to me. When I eat dinner, there is always a sort of pleasure to begin with, but after I’ve been eating for a while I start to feel uncomfortable. In the beginning we feel good and call it pleasure. In other words, that pleasure is our projection. We project that something is happiness, we give it the name “happiness,” but actually, it leads to pain.

- Our self-existent pleasurable experiences are not real happiness
- When our hunger starts to subside, we call that happiness
- We project something pleasurable to be real happiness but it actually leads to pain

The sufferings of samsara

3 The three types of suffering

3.2 The suffering of change

PERVERSIVE COMPOUNDING suffering is the most important suffering to understand and renounce. Even animals understand and have aversion to the suffering of suffering, and many people can see the shortcomings of the attachment that lies at the heart of the suffering of change, but pervasive compounding suffering is what really ties us to samsara and triggers the other two levels of suffering.

The aggregates that we now have are pervasive compounding suffering. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama often stresses, “pervasive” means that they are under the control of delusion and karma. That’s why we have fear, loneliness, depression and all the other negative emotional thoughts. Western psychiatry and psychology explore why people have emotional problems, but the answer is right here. Because there is delusion, there are these agitated unhappy minds. Because there is attachment to comfort and happiness, there is fear and worry about meeting discomfort and unhappiness. Because of attachment there’s worldly concern. All the myriad problems that plague our life stem from this deep-rooted deluded misunderstanding that pervades our mind. It is called “compounding” because the imprint produces aggregates of a similar type. Our present aggregates create future aggregates of a similar type, which again experience the three types of suffering. In other words, these aggregates compound another set of aggregates, the future-life aggregates, which are also suffering in nature.

Just having this impure body and this deluded mind means that we experience pervasive compounding suffering. There is no greater problem than this. Because of the mistake of having taken a samsaric body, our life is constantly busy, serving our body’s needs like a slave. Having this contaminated body is like living in a garbage can or a septic tank.

- Pervasive compounding suffering is what we most need to understand and renounce
- Under the control of delusion and karma, we perpetuate our suffering from life to life
- Having this contaminated body is like living in a garbage can or septic tank

The sufferings of samsara

3 The three types of suffering

3.3 Pervasive compounding suffering

TOTALLY IGNORANT of the cause of happiness and the cause of suffering, we worldly beings think we're always working for happiness, but in reality we are constantly creating the cause of suffering. We keep ourselves totally busy, day and night, like ants frantically running around, up and down trees or whatever. Because our motivation is not even attachment to future lives but just attachment to this life, every action of our body, speech and mind becomes negative karma.

In that, we are no different from insects, spiders, crickets, ants and so forth. Our motivation is identical to theirs. Likewise, the billionaire, the zillionaire, the trillionaire—there is no difference; their motivation is identical. We have all been billionaires, zillionaires, trillionaires, kings in the god and human realms, Indra and Brahma, numberless times. We are just like those slugs that come out when it rains. Just like them, we work only for this life, so every action we do is nonvirtuous.

Until we are free from the control of delusion and karma we must constantly suffer: the suffering of pain, the suffering of change and pervasive compounding suffering. We encounter the suffering of the six realms and suffer again and again, endlessly. Therefore, we need to be free from the whole of samsara and achieve lower nirvana, the blissful state of peace. But that alone is not sufficient. Rather, we must achieve great nirvana, full enlightenment. We must free ourselves from even the subtle obscurations, the obscurations to knowledge, especially for all sentient beings, to free them from the oceans of samsaric suffering and bring them to full enlightenment as quickly as possible. We must achieve full enlightenment as quickly as possible.

- We keep ourselves busy, day and night, creating the cause for more suffering
- A billionaire who works only for this life shares the same motivation as an insect
- Even freedom from suffering is not enough: we must achieve full enlightenment

The sufferings of samsara

Wrap-up

THREE IS no use in wanting to stay in samsara and not suffer. The whole point is to try to get out of samsara. Until we do, we have to accept we are going to suffer, and when something unpleasant happens we should just think, “Of course this has happened. This is samsara! Whatever happens will be in the nature of suffering because I am living in samsara.”

So there is no reason to worry. When we encounter a miserable situation, if we reject it, thinking how unfair it is and how it shouldn’t be happening to us, we only double the suffering and exaggerate the problem. How much we suffer depends on the way we think. If we can accept this, it’s not such a shock when something unpleasant happens. We expect there will be suffering and so we can handle whatever happens much better. It’s like jumping into water. If we think it will be warm when it’s cold, we get a shock, but if we know it’s going to be cold, there is no great surprise. We know we are living in samsara and we know that we are bound to experience suffering because that’s its nature.

Thinking like this can also help us accept responsibility for our own suffering, seeing it as the result of a previous negative karmic action that we have done. That way, we are taking the responsibility on ourselves and not pointing the finger of blame at the other person. Realizing that we are the only one to blame, we determine that we had better not create the cause of that suffering again or we will once again experience the result.

- For as long as we remain in samsara, suffering is inevitable
- If we think that miserable situations are unfair, we only double the suffering
- Taking responsibility for our suffering strengthens our determination to get out of samsara

The sufferings of samsara

Wrap-up

WE SHOULD enjoy our material life as much as we can but at the same time understand the nature of our enjoyment—the nature of both the object we are enjoying and the mind that is experiencing that enjoyment and how the two relate. If we understand all this deeply, that is religion.

If we have no idea of all this, if we see only the outside view and never look to see what is going on inside, our mind is narrow and, from my point of view, materialistic. It is not because we necessarily possess the materials but because of our attitude. Say I dedicate my life to one object: “This flower is so beautiful. As long as it’s alive, my life is worth living. If this flower dies, I want to die too.” If I believe this, I’m stupid, aren’t I? A more realistic approach would be, “Yes, the flower is beautiful, but it won’t last. Today it’s alive, tomorrow it’ll be dead. However, my satisfaction doesn’t come from only that flower and I wasn’t born human just to enjoy flowers.”

Therefore, whatever we understand by religion, Buddhism or simply philosophical ideas should be integrated with the basics of our life. Then we can experiment: “Does dissatisfaction come from my own mind or not?” That is enough. We don’t need to make extreme radical changes to our life or suddenly cut ourselves off from the world in order to learn that dissatisfaction comes from our own mind. We can continue to lead a normal life but at the same time try to observe the nature of the dissatisfied mind. This approach is so realistic and so practical and in this way we will definitely get all the answers we seek.

- We should enjoy material life while understanding the nature of our enjoyment
- Materialism is a narrow mind obsessed with external rather than internal things
- We can find all the answers we seek by observing the nature of the dissatisfied mind

The sufferings of samsara

Wrap-up



FROM BEGINNINGLESS samsaric rebirths up to now, this deluded negative mind has made us suffer numberless times. We have experienced the oceans of suffering of each realm numberless times from beginningless samsaric rebirths. If we think well, there aren't a hundred thousand things for us to do, to think or to create. It's very simple. Do you see? There's just one thing that will stop all our suffering and that is Dharma practice. The answer, the conclusion, is to practice Dharma. That's it.

People currently live for a hundred years but it's very little time, and it's becoming less and less, so little, so scarce. Even what time we have will become less and less—seventy, sixty, thirty or twenty years, we're really not sure. In a year, in a month, in a week or in a day, death will come. When it will come, we're not sure. There's not much to think except to practice Dharma. There's no doubt. There's just one decision in our life, one thing to do, and that's Dharma practice. Nothing else. Everything else is meaningless.

We have suffered numberless times from beginningless rebirths, and all the activities in this life are nothing new. We've done everything numberless times. Without thinking about the endless suffering of samsara or the numberless times we will experience the oceans of suffering of each realm in the future or the suffering of samsara that is without end—just thinking about our experience numberless times in the past is enough. Just this is enough to practice Dharma. If we think about this, everything that is non-Dharma stops and we practice Dharma.

- Dharma practice is the only thing that will bring our beginningless rebirths to an end
- Death can come at any moment and anything other than Dharma is meaningless
- Reflecting on our numberless past sufferings will motivate us to practice Dharma

The sufferings of samsara

Wrap-up

LIBERATION IS not only for religious people. If we understand our own situation, our own lifestyle, even if we're non-religious we can see our own confusion, our own dissatisfaction; we can see that what we consider to be happiness, that which causes attachment to arise, doesn't truly give us pleasure. We can also see how our experiences of misery make it easy to get angry and our neutral experiences make us ignorant and dull. This is samsara. Our entire life becomes samsara. It's not just that we're alive, therefore we're in samsara. No. It's linked to our ignorant, grasping, dull attitude. That's what makes our life samsara. And as its name, cyclic existence, suggests, it's a circle and we keep going around and around without end.

Meditation can release us from all this repeated, repeated, repeated, emotional self-sensitivity. With release our life becomes more stable; we have fewer expectations because we understand the nature of things—that the pleasure they give is limited. If I expect my clothes to give me everlasting pleasure I'm going to be disappointed. In the same way, human beings cannot give each other everlasting pleasure; a Himalayan gorilla monk like me cannot give you everlasting pleasure. And it's the same thing with all the other people in relationships on earth. It's not possible for one to give everlasting pleasure to the other; each person has to make an individual effort to develop their own mind.

Lord Buddha's teachings are so simple. We just have to check into our own life. Investigating how we live is the first step to renunciation. Once we have developed renunciation of samsara we're on the path to liberation. Knowledge of how samsara works is itself renunciation.

- It's our own ignorant, grasping attitude that creates our confusion and dissatisfaction
- Meditation enables us to understand the nature of things and have fewer expectations
- Once we've developed renunciation of samsara, we're on the path to liberation

BUDDHIST PSYCHOLOGY describes six basic emotions that frustrate the human mind, disturbing its peace, making it restless: ignorance, attachment, anger, pride, deluded doubt and distorted views. These are mental attitudes, not external phenomena. Buddhism emphasizes that to overcome these delusions, the root of all suffering, belief and faith are not much help: we have to understand their nature.

If we do not investigate our own mind with introspective knowledge-wisdom, we will never see what's in there. Without checking, no matter how much we talk about our mind and our emotions, we'll never really understand that our basic emotion is egocentricity and that this is what's making us restless. Now, to overcome our ego, we don't have to give up all our possessions. We can keep our possessions; they're not what's making our life difficult. We're restless because we are clinging to our possessions with attachment. Ego and attachment pollute our mind, making it unclear, ignorant and agitated and preventing the light of wisdom from growing. The solution to this problem is meditation.

Meditation does not imply only the development of single-pointed concentration, sitting in some corner doing nothing. Meditation is an alert state of mind, the opposite of sluggishness; meditation is wisdom. We should remain aware every moment of our daily life, fully conscious of what we are doing and why and how we are doing it. We do almost everything unconsciously. We eat unconsciously; we drink unconsciously; we talk unconsciously. Although we claim to be conscious, we are completely unaware of the afflictions rampaging through our minds, influencing everything we do. We must check up for ourselves; experiment. This is how Buddhism works. It gives us ideas that we can check out in our own experience to see if they're true or not.

- There are six basic emotions that frustrate the human mind and disturb its peace
- Through investigating our mind we see that our restlessness comes from the ego
- The solution is meditation: being fully conscious of what we are doing, why, and how

The evolution of samsara

1 *The root delusions*



IF WE ARE GOING TO LEARN ONLY ONE THING FROM
OUR DHARMA STUDIES, IT SHOULD BE THAT EVERY
PROBLEM ON EARTH COMES FROM ATTACHMENT
—LAMA YESHE

ACCORDING TO Lord Buddha's teachings, as long as we don't realize that our real enemy is within us, we will never recognize that the mind of attachment is the root of all the problems our body and mind experience. If, however, we see the psychological origin of our problems and understand the nature of attachment and how it works to cause aggression, desire and hatred, our mind becomes very powerful.

When we're in a peaceful environment we think, "Oh, I'm so peaceful, my meditation is so good, I have such great realizations," but when we're in the street or out shopping in a supermarket and people bump into us, we freak out. Because we're not sitting in meditation but walking around, our mind is completely uncontrolled. However, if we understand the psychology of attachment and how it lies at the root of our various reactions, we will not freak out so easily and will really be able to control our mind, no matter where we are or with whom.

I'm not talking philosophy here but truth based on living experience. In fact, not only Buddhism but all religions recognize the shortcomings of attachment. Even worldly people talk about its drawbacks. But even though we say the words, "attachment this, attachment that," we don't really recognize it as the biggest problem on earth. Therefore, what I'm saying is, it would be wonderful if we could recognize that our own attachment is the cause of every single problem that we experience. Problems with our husband, wife, children, society, authorities, everybody; having a bad reputation; our friends not liking us; people talking badly about us; our hating our teacher, our lama or our priest—all this truly comes from our own attachment. We need to check up.

- Attachment is the root of all the problems experienced by our body and mind
- Through understanding the psychology of attachment we will learn to control our mind
- If we check up, we will see that attachment is the biggest problem on earth

The evolution of samsara

1 *The root delusions*

1.1 *Attachment*

ANGER IS the worst karma to have. Not only does it destroy our good-quality peaceful joyful life right now but it also destroys our good-quality next life as well. There is a reason that we are born in an unpleasant place, isn't there? Due to causation, the mental energy of anger irritates and results in our physical situation, our physical body. Buddhists believe that everything has a reason, everything has a history and an evolution.

So for us it is very important to control our anger as much as possible. I think that anger destroys all the good qualities of our human dignity. For this reason, it is very important to control it. For example, one moment of anger can destroy a good friendship of twenty or thirty years, a long-time relationship in which the friends shared everything. Anger can destroy this in just a moment. The angry mind has no appreciation for any of this. Can you imagine? It's unbelievable, but even the shortest moment of anger can destroy the collected energy of twenty or thirty years of friendship and lead to misery. All these things are part of the human experience, aren't they?

In Buddhism, it is highly advised that we not manifest anger physically or verbally. Because by the time it manifests it is already super strong, super intense. So before we express our anger physically or verbally, we need to stand up and control it. Somehow, we need to digest or abandon the emotion of anger—through meditation, through analytical wisdom, through whatever method we can use.

- Anger destroys not only our current joyful life but also the good quality of our next one
- Even the shortest moment of anger can destroy a long-term relationship
- We need to use every possible method to control and abandon the emotion of anger

The evolution of samsara

1 *The root delusions*

1.2 *Anger*



THREE ARE two types of ignorance: one is the thought which is unclear about relative truth and the other is the thought which is unclear about the absolute nature. That first type of ignorance is the unknowing mind, the unseeing mind. It's like when our eyes are closed, we can't see the object. Ignorance of relative truth means not understanding karma, the four noble truths or the objects of refuge, Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

The difference between ignorance of relative truth and ignorance of absolute truth is like the example of a piece of rope. If we can't see clearly, we don't know that it is a rope. The mind which doesn't see the rope is like the ignorance of the relative truth, and the mind which believes that piece of rope is a snake is like the ignorance of absolute truth. Similarly, the way we perceive the self is like the mind which believes the rope is a real snake, but there is no snake there.

When we are ignorant we walk about with our eyes closed, not seeing anything. All around us is cause and effect, and yet we are blind to it and thus we create negative actions and wonder why we suffer. We are unable to see how attachment and anger lead us to suffering. We have no understanding of the Three Rare Sublime Ones and how they are the vital ingredients in our life that can save us from harm. Most of all, we are unable to see how the I, and all things, are empty of inherent existence. This is the fundamental ignorance from which all suffering comes.

- Ignorance is being unclear about karma, the four noble truths and the objects of refuge
- Ignorance results in misapprehension of both relative and absolute truth
- Ignorance is the source of all our suffering

The evolution of samsara

1 The root delusions

1.3 Ignorance

PRIDE IS a feeling of superiority, as if we are on a very high mountain looking down. We see others as somehow not as good as us and feel superior. Perhaps we feel that we are more intelligent, give more money to charity, are more handsome, speak better or come from a more powerful country. There are millions of reasons for feeling proud. The feeling is that of being filled up, inflated. We don't see that kind of mind as in any way negative and, in fact, are usually quite proud of being proud.

When we are filled with pride, we can't take anything in. Even when we listen to teachings it is very difficult for them to benefit our mind. We might not understand something, but pride stops us from asking others to explain. We take on the aspect of a Dharma practitioner but because of pride we can never obtain the three great meanings: happiness in future lives, liberation and enlightenment.

The method of controlling our pride is very simple. All we have to do is to think realistically about our achievements and we will feel very humble. When we reflect on all the Dharma realizations that we have not attained we will see that we still have a very long way to go. At present we have a perfect human rebirth, but are we making the most of it? When we die, can we be one hundred percent certain that we won't fall into the suffering lower realms? Can we safely say that we have never accumulated any negative karma at all during this lifetime? If the answer to any of these questions is "no" then there is little reason to feel proud.

- Pride is a feeling of superiority that we often fail to see as negative
- When we are filled with pride it's very difficult for Dharma teachings to benefit our mind
- The simplest way to control pride is to be realistic about our achievements

The evolution of samsara

1 The root delusions

1.4 Pride

DOUBT is the attitude that is uncertain whether things such as the four noble truths, karma or the Three Rare Sublime Ones actually exist. Doubt is a very disturbing mind because it blocks any progress on the path. Through not being sure of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and the efficacy of relying on them, we don't take refuge and therefore never become an "inner being" which would allow us to eliminate obscurations and attain realizations. Not knowing whether there is such a thing as cause and effect, we don't have the energy to turn away from nonvirtue.

Doubt grows from ignorance. It is a two-pointed mind—thinking maybe something is true, maybe it's not—that cannot reach a conclusion. Even if we have studied the Dharma and have an intellectual knowledge of all its subjects, unless our doubts are overcome we will be unable to achieve any results. It's like possessing a medicine but never taking it because we have no faith in the cure.

When we embark on the spiritual path it is extremely healthy to have doubts, but this is not what we are talking about here. Those kinds of doubt involve checking whether something really exists as the texts describe and analyzing whether the teachings work for us, rather than just accepting everything without question. The Buddha said we should not accept his words just because of his authority but should test everything just as a goldsmith assays gold to determine its purity. It is very good to doubt, investigate and come to a correct conclusion. However, here we are talking about the sort of doubt that simply tends to disbelieve in something that really does exist, without checking any further.

- Doubt is the attitude that is uncertain about key aspects of the Dharma
- It grows from ignorance and prevents us from achieving any results on the path
- In contrast, to doubt, investigate and come to a correct conclusion is very good

The evolution of samsara

1 The root delusions

1.5. Doubt



OF THE six root delusions, the final one is divided into the five extreme, or deluded, views. The first of these, *the view of the changeable aggregates*, is the foundation of the others. It is the view that although our five aggregates are changing all the time we don't see them as such. We superimpose a solid, permanent sense of I onto the aggregates.

The second deluded view, *the view of extremes*, is also very subtle and pervasive. It is our view of things and events as being either permanent and independent, which is called eternalism, or not existing at all, which is called nihilism. Thirdly there is *the view of holding deluded views as supreme* through believing that any of the other four deluded views are the correct viewpoint. Fourthly, we can have *the view of holding our own misguided moral and religious discipline as supreme*. This deluded view is the cause of enormous conflict in the world. Our culture or religion might encourage actions that don't accord with moral conduct but we still think it to be acceptable.

The final deluded view is simply called *wrong views*. This is any mistaken view but in particular the belief that there is no such thing as karma, that all the universes, worlds, environments and sentient beings are not products of karma but of a divine creator. It also includes seeing things as existing from their own side. This deluded view is the very root of cyclic existence and when we live with this hallucination it gives rise to all the other delusions.

- The most fundamental deluded view superimposes a permanent I onto the aggregates
- Other deluded views lead us into eternalism or nihilism and create enormous conflict
- The fifth deluded view is any wrong view, particularly disbelief in karma and emptiness

The evolution of samsara

1 *The root delusions*

1.6 *The five deluded views*

IT'S VERY important to recognize that all desire, hatred and other delusions and the problems they bring come from attachment and ego. Actually, of the two, attachment and ego, it's ego that comes first. Delusion starts with ego; attachment follows. How is this? The concept of ego builds a projection of "I" and paints that polluted projection with a veneer of qualities. Then, when the I—superficial, artificial and illusory—starts looking at the pleasures of the sense world, it labels certain objects as desirable. From this, attachment arises, sticking, or clinging, to these attractive objects. This, very briefly, is the evolution of attachment.

The moment our ego says "I," we automatically identify ourselves as totally separate from other atoms, other people. On the basis of this view of two different things—self and other—we automatically see I as the most important one. Then, with attachment, our narrow mind chooses one particular atom as a source of sense pleasure. This then makes us view all other atoms as either irrelevant or as objects of hatred. That's the way it all starts.

In other words, when we perceive the hallucination of the self-existent, independent I, we immediately accept the existence of other. That other then appears as totally separate from us. If there were no I, there would be no appearance of other. But we build up that separateness, and this is where all the problems of samsara come from. All this is the work of ego, which is a product of ignorance. Ignorance causes ego.

- Delusion starts with the ego that builds the polluted projection of "I"
- As soon as our ego says "I" we see ourselves as separate and more important than others
- This is the source of all the problems of samsara, and can all be traced back to ignorance

The evolution of samsara

1 The root delusions

1.7 The stages in their development

WHATEVER EXISTS—good news, bad news, heaven and hell, samsara or nirvana—is a manifestation of the mind. When the mind is covered with superstitions, it creates suffering. Therefore, in order to gain release from this suffering, it is important to understand both the characteristic nature of the deluded mind and the six factors causing these superstitions to arise and increase. Considering and meditating on these factors is so worthwhile. Our understanding can become so powerful that it makes our mind really straight. Otherwise there is no way to begin to rid ourselves of delusions.

If we have developed the necessary mental discipline and are sufficiently aware of what is happening inside us, there is no reason why we cannot choose to express only those thoughts that will bring happiness to ourselves and others. The whole world might rise against us, but if the ability to control our mind were well developed, we could still view everyone as our friend rather than cower with fear and hatred.

If we could exert such conscious control over the mind, imagine the great peace we would experience! There would be no confusion, and we would create no problems for ourselves or others. Such a deeply felt experience of wellbeing is a definite result of Dharma practice. It can be gained by anyone with the perseverance to pursue an inner search along the spiritual path. Solving problems by gaining control over our mind is not only the most effective way to deal with difficulties but also the easiest and most harmless. We can gain true peace of mind without threatening the wellbeing of anyone.

- Understanding the nature and cause of our delusions will make our mind straight
- We can learn to control our mind through mental discipline and self-awareness
- This is the most effective way to solve our problems and gain true peace of mind



LET'S SAY the thought of chocolate cake comes into our mind. Why does this thought of chocolate cake come? Because our previous experience of enjoying chocolate cake has left an imprint on our consciousness. The experience itself has disappeared completely, but the imprint remains, as if we'd sealed it, stamped it, in our mind. As long as that stamp is there, the indestructible identification will also be there.

It's the same whenever we psychologically experience anything—happiness, misery, anger, bliss—it is never lost. It is imprinted on our mind, programmed into our mental computer. It is always there. This is memory. There is a continuity between the past experience and the present recollection of it. It's like electricity: the source is somewhere else, but the energy comes through the various wires to where we are now, without a break. The previous experience, the thought, the person, the object—everything is gone, but still the memory of craving-desire comes, superstition comes, because it is imprinted on the mind.

When we understand that the experience of the chocolate cake arises interdependently, we can see that it has no self-entity, that it doesn't come from the object; it comes instead from our mental energy. We don't need too much explanation to see this—it's simple, isn't it? The imprint of the previous experience of chocolate cake is always there, whether we are awake, asleep or meditating. Of course, there are cooperative causes too: the feeling of hunger, the arising of desire and the object, the chocolate cake. All these come together. We have to realize that the desirable chocolate cake is a complete hallucination. Objectively, it's not there; it's as if the imprint in our mind manifests into chocolate cake.

- The thought of chocolate cake arises due to the mental imprint of a previous experience
- Every psychological experience we have is programmed into our mind and never lost
- When this imprint meets with the cooperative causes, then chocolate cake appears to us

The evolution of samsara

2 The causes of the delusions

2.1 The base

MOST OF the time, when the object is near us and the karmic imprint is in our mind, bang!—delusion arises. A good example is when we go shopping. The object is there on the shelf. Through the sense perception of our eye we come into contact with it and, before we are aware of what is happening, our mind sinks with attachment into the object. It can happen in a very sneaky way and it can be extremely difficult to separate our mind from this desired object. Our hand automatically moves to our pocket, finds some money and we buy, even before we know what we are doing. It is so simple, isn't it?

In the West it is incredible how everything is exaggerated so that the deluded mind is made certain to pay attention to it. "Look at this, how fantastic it is!" This technique is used so extensively that even when we give a meditation course we have to advertise: "Come to our fantastic meditation course and learn all about your amazing mind!" Western culture seems a little too much for me.

Buddha gave a very simple name to all of this. He called the realm that we are living in "the desire world." It is now easy to see clearly why he gave it this name. The desire world—desire is here! The deluded mind coming into contact with desirable objects leads to superstition, producing more and more delusion. It is for this reason that Milarepa stayed in a cave. He knew that once the deluded mind comes into contact with the object of desire, delusions arise uncontrollably. That is why he thought it better to avoid such contact until his mind was tamed.

- Delusion arises when the object is near us and the karmic imprint is in our mind
- In the West everything is exaggerated so that the deluded mind will pay attention to it
- As the deluded mind connects with its objects of desire, more delusion constantly arises

THE THIRD cause of delusions mentioned by Lama Tsongkhapa is influences from the outside. Negative, misleading friends who give us deluded information are included here. These are the people we know who make us confused. Therefore, whom we have for friends, with whom we stay in close contact, is very important. For instance, if all around us people were drinking, with some control we might be able to remain uninfluenced by them for a week or so. But after a while we would no longer be able to control ourselves because the situation would be too overpowering.

Such influence is not limited to bad friends or good friends. In our life we have so many “teachers,” people who feed us information that only adds to our delusions. Therefore it is very important to stay around those people who give us the right vibration, the wisdom vibration. This is much better than exposing ourselves all the time to polluted, confused vibrations. But this does not mean that we give up completely on all misleading friends, hating them and having bad thoughts about them. No, this should not be our reaction. It is essential always to remain compassionate. We should also remember that we are polluted already; our friends are not to blame for our delusions. Their influence just makes this pollution thicker and thicker.

The Western mind is very interesting. In some respects it is very skeptical, doubting everything. This can be a very good attitude, especially when surrounded by untruth. Yet, in other respects, the Western mind is totally the opposite of skeptical. If it sees something that has one good aspect, that has one interesting side to it, then without hesitation it accepts the whole thing as good. This overly emotional attitude is very dangerous.

- Examining our life demonstrates the importance of how we choose our friends
- It's better to be around people who give us wisdom rather than confused vibrations
- The Western mind is very skeptical but can also be overly emotional and uncritical

The evolution of samsara

2 The causes of the delusions

2.3 Distraction

DAY 252 EACH PIECE OF WRONG INFORMATION THAT
WE GRASP AT THICKENS OUR DELUSED MIND
—LAMA YESHE

THE FOURTH cause that makes delusions arise is following false teachings: believing that someone is a special teacher and therefore listening to and following all the wrong conceptions he or she teaches. Teachings, of whatever quality, can be very interesting. But when people find things interesting, it often just means that they crave information.

Of course, if we have wisdom, we can read any type of garbage information without being affected by it. We can be checking up on it without taking it all in greedily. That's OK. But when we are too interested, too attracted, "Yes, yes, tell me more!" it leaves a very strong impression on our mind. There is a total lack of discriminating wisdom-knowledge, no clear idea of what is right and wrong. We take everything in with no judgment whatsoever.

The same is true of all types of information. So much comes in, but generally there is no integration and no differentiation between what is useful and what is harmful. In fact, nearly every aspect of popular Western culture—books, magazines, movies, television and the like—is totally dedicated to producing more and more desire and superstition. There are exceptions to this, of course. Some movies, for instance, are different. But most of them show us what we like, what the superstitious mind wants to see—anything to arouse our interest. The people who create these films, books and so forth have a practical understanding of psychology. They know exactly what arouses people's desires and superstitions and what will make them more confused than they already are.

- Delusions arise when we listen to and follow the wrong conceptions of a false teacher
- If we lack discriminating wisdom-knowledge, we eagerly accept garbage information
- Popular Western culture is designed to arouse desire, superstition and confusion



THE FIFTH factor increasing the strength of the delusions is habit. It can work this way: at one time we had a certain experience with an object. Then, when we meet a similar object, we re-enact the first experience, and each time we repeat the action the strength of that memory increases, becoming more powerful and distorted in our imagination. Habit builds up certain associations so strongly that whenever a similar situation arises, our mind automatically runs toward delusion.

Some people become so obsessed in this way with a deluding object that they cannot forget it. Why does this happen? Because the experience has been repeated over and over and over again, making the imprint of it thicker and thicker. The mind dwells in the recollection of this experience, adding to the delusion. A person cannot even sleep without a vision of that object appearing in their dreams. I am sure that everyone has had experience of this phenomenon. If a habit is repeated often enough and its imprint becomes strong enough, we can actually go mad.

Sometimes the object of delusion forcefully impresses itself on our imagination. For example, in the West, when we are about to part from a loved one, we both plead, “Please don’t forget me! Keep me in your memory. If you forget me, it means you don’t love me anymore.” That’s why we are not free. We can see that we are not free, because we have become obsessed in this way with one object.

- Habit builds up associations that make our mind automatically run toward delusion
- When an experience is repeated over and again, the imprint becomes thicker and thicker
- When we’re obsessed with an object of delusion, it’s clear that we’re not free

The evolution of samsara

2 *The causes of the delusions*

2.5 *Habit*

SEEING SOME kind of desirable object always involves an over-estimation. Its good aspects are emphasized so much that we lose all judgment about it. Simultaneously, we view that object as if it were somehow self-existent. We conceive of it as something permanent, existing self-sufficiently the way it appears to us. We fail to see that the way it appears is actually a function of our own projections. Instead, we think that these exaggerated qualities come from the object itself, rather than being what we have projected onto the object from our own side.

For example, we have a partner with whom we are obsessed. We find their every movement and gesture interesting. The way they walk, what they say, what they do—it all seems good to us. Even when they do something incredibly bad, for us it becomes a source of pleasure. We are concentrating so much on their attractive qualities that their negative aspects are totally obscured. The mind works in such a way, however, that if one day they say something particularly unpleasant to us, our attitude begins to change. We think, “They’re not nice at all.” Our mind concentrates on this thought. “Not nice, not nice, not nice. . . .” Soon everything about them appears repulsive; there is nothing about them anymore that is pleasing to us. We can see this happen, can’t we?

It is incredible how the deluded mind works. First, something appears completely positive, and then it changes to its opposite. But I say that it is impossible for any object, any sentient being, to be completely positive or completely negative. Everything has both positive and negative energy. It is only the obsessed mind that sees things in terms of black and white.

- Seeing a desirable object, we regard it as permanent and exaggerate its good aspects
- At first we might see our partner as completely attractive, then as completely repulsive
- The way the deluded mind works is to mistakenly divide things into black and white

The evolution of samsara

2 The causes of the delusions

2.6 Wrong comprehension



DELOURSIONS HAVE destroyed all our happiness in the past, they are destroying it now and they will continue to destroy it for as long as we remain under their control. If we want to continuously practice Dharma without hindrances, then we need to continuously remember the shortcomings of the delusions. There is a danger that this can be simply an intellectual understanding rather than a strong feeling, and therefore we remain a friend to the delusions in our heart while speaking out against them on the surface. Delusions are the greatest hindrance to attaining not only the perfection of liberation and enlightenment but even the perfections of samsara. They can do nothing but give harm.

Without delusions, problems wouldn't happen. Suicide, harmful criticism and enemies would all cease to exist. As long as we harbor the seeds of delusion in our mind, delusions will always plague us, rob us of happiness, cause us to endure suffering and keep us away from complete freedom and enlightenment.

If we could really see the suffering that our delusions have caused us over countless lifetimes then we would think of nothing else except destroying them. Even the buddhas cannot fathom the extent of the sufferings that our delusions have caused us. Dictators spend many years planning to take over other countries and use all their skills and determination to accomplish this, but this is nothing compared with overcoming even one delusion. We have countless delusions to overcome, therefore we need perseverance and great determination, seeing the delusions as our only enemy and determining to destroy them all, no matter how many eons it takes.

- To practice Dharma, we need to continuously remember the shortcomings of delusions
- Delusions are the source of our problems and will always rob us of happiness
- If we could see the harm caused by delusions, we would think only of destroying them



IF WE NEGLECT TO PROTECT OUR MIND, WE CAN
NEITHER CLOSE THE DOOR TO SUFFERING
NOR OPEN THE DOOR TO HAPPINESS
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

DUE TO the seeds of delusion within us, attachment arises whenever we encounter a desirable object and aversion arises whenever we encounter an undesirable object. If we had practiced mindfulness we would have seen how our mind follows those objects and causes our various sufferings. If we could see this clearly, we would have little difficulty avoiding our delusions. We might not initially be able to destroy the delusions, but by watching them start to arise we would be able to avert and not follow them.

However, in the absence of mindfulness these disturbing emotions arise unforeseen and generate a sequence of negative actions. Before we know it, attachment to a desirable object is there and we are helpless not to follow it; before we know it, anger toward a repulsive object is there and again we are helpless not to follow it. From the trunk come the branch delusions and then the leaves of karmic actions, resulting in the fruit of suffering.

Mindfulness is the most important tool we have to guard our mind and make sure that we never create nonvirtue. We need it to be constantly present, always watching and checking what the rest of the mind is doing. Whenever any nonvirtuous thought arises, we need mindfulness to identify it immediately and give ourselves the opportunity of averting it. We need the mind of introspection to be there standing like a guard at the door of a house, constantly alert, watching for any thief that might try to sneak past and steal the treasures inside. The treasure is our happiness and our delusions are the thief.

- Due to the seeds of delusion within us, disturbing emotions continually arise
- In the absence of mindfulness, these emotions generate a sequence of negative actions
- Mindfulness is like a guard that stops the thief of delusions from stealing our happiness

IN ORDER to make our lives happy, we need to create only virtuous actions, and to do that we need to be able to judge right from wrong through analyzing every action that we do. Only with careful analysis can we judge our motivation and see whether we have a positive or a negative mind. This means that we must understand karma fully.

The Sanskrit term “karma” means action, specifically mental action, and is the initiating movement of the mind that leads us into involvement with an object. We can therefore relate karma to intention, one of the omnipresent mental factors. Whenever there is mind there is intention, karma. Before any action there must be a motivation or intention, otherwise there would be no energy for the mind to act. In fact, there needs to be not only intention for the act to be initiated but also intention during the act so that it will be completed. The initial intention is called the motivation of cause—*the mental karma*—and the intention that is the energy behind completing the act is called the motivation of time—*the intended action, or intended karma*.

For an action to be as pure as possible, we need to ensure that we not only have the best possible motivation beforehand but also while we are carrying it out. In that way, what we do becomes very powerful positive karma. If we don’t check our motivation both before and during the action, what starts out as virtue can become nonvirtue. In that case we have still created positive karma with our initial motivation of cause, but the motivation of time is negative and therefore the action is not completely perfect.

- In order to be happy, we must constantly analyze the motivation behind all our actions
- Mental karma is the intention before an action and intended karma is what completes it
- It is intention that makes an action virtuous or nonvirtuous, not its outward appearance



As PABONGKA Rinpoche says in *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, our dying thoughts activate the karma that will be the cause of our next rebirth, and the activators of this throwing karma are craving and grasping—the eighth and ninth links in the twelve links of dependent arising. Rinpoche says that this takes place while the mind is still active and we can still recall virtue or be reminded of it by other people.

At this point it is so important to be able to control the arising of the disturbing thoughts by remembering the guru and the teachings—renunciation of samsara, karma, emptiness, loving kindness, great compassion and the rest—which give us the chance to be born in a buddha's pure land or to take a perfect human rebirth. If our last gross thoughts are virtuous, the throwing karma will be virtuous; if the last gross thoughts are nonvirtuous, the throwing karma will be nonvirtuous. The karmic seed that ripens is whichever is heavier, the stronger habit—which could have been planted hundreds, even millions, of lifetimes ago; if they're equal, the seed that was planted first will be the one that ripens.

If we die with anger, say, or strong attachment, our birth will be only in the lower realms, nowhere else. Generally, attachment causes rebirth as a hungry ghost, ignorance causes rebirth as an animal, and anger as a hell being. In these lower realms we will experience unimaginable sufferings for an incredible length of time. By comparison, the suffering in the human realm is nothing—in fact, it's like great pleasure.

- Our dying thoughts activate the throwing karma that will be the cause of our next rebirth
- The throwing karma depends on whether our last thoughts are virtuous or nonvirtuous
- If we die with anger or strong attachment our birth will be only in the lower realms

The evolution of samsara
4 Karma, death, and rebirth
4.2 What happens at death



WHEN THE mind leaves a dead body, it enters the intermediate state, the *bardo*. The form of the intermediate state body is that of the next rebirth. This being has no resistance to matter, is indestructible and has many psychic powers, such as the ability to fly or do anything else it thinks of. As soon as the being thinks of a place, no matter how far away it is, the body is there. These powers are derived not through meditation but karma.

The maximum length of existence in the intermediate state body is seven days, although the being can take rebirth in a physical body at any time before that. After seven days, the intermediate being dies what is called a small death, taking rebirth in the same realm and in the same form for a further seven days, until another small death occurs or a physical body is found. The longest intermediate state existence is forty-nine days.

For beings born from a womb, the cause of rebirth is seeing the future parents in sexual union and having attraction toward one of them. If the intermediate state being is going to be reborn as a female human being, it develops strong attachment to the father and aversion to the mother. For a male, the opposite occurs. This attachment is enough for it to leave the intermediate state and take rebirth. The intermediate state being wants to have sex with the future parent, but as it approaches it can only see that parent's sex organ, causing anger to arise. So the conditions for the death of the intermediate state being and its rebirth as a human being are attachment followed by anger. This makes it easy to see how ordinary birth is caused by delusion and karma.

- After death, the mind enters the intermediate stage, with a body similar to its next rebirth
- The intermediate stage or bardo lasts from seven to forty-nine days
- The cause of rebirth is attachment to one of the future parents, followed by anger

The evolution of samsara

4 Karma, death, and rebirth

4.3 The intermediate state



EACH OF us has been born as a human being. As such we have the potential to give meaning and purpose to our life. To take full advantage of this, we must go beyond what lower animals can do. By utilizing such a human rebirth properly and gaining control over our mind, we can sever the root of all suffering completely. Within the space of one or more lives, we can escape from the cycle of death and rebirth. As it is, we have to be reborn again and again without choice or control, experiencing all the sufferings of an uncontrolled physical body. But with proper application, this involuntary cycle can be broken, freeing us from all suffering and dissatisfaction permanently.

To be born human is really very fortunate because we have the precious ability to use our understanding with discrimination. The big difference between us and a dog is that we are able to examine our own behavior whereas a dog cannot. Because we can judge whether or not our mental and physical actions are wholesome, we have both a great opportunity and a great responsibility to examine the nature of our faults and shortcomings. While this is much more difficult than noticing what is wrong with others, it is very beneficial if we can discover and root out these weaknesses in ourselves.

What a shame it would be not to take advantage of this rare endowment and instead follow our instincts blindly and uncritically! Thus, whether what we encounter is good or bad, we should experiment as much as possible with the purest Dharma wisdom-knowledge, transforming everything into the everlasting peaceful path to enlightenment.

- Our human rebirth offers us the potential to sever the root of all suffering completely
- It gives us the precious ability and responsibility to examine our own behavior
- This is our opportunity to transform everything into the peaceful path to enlightenment

The evolution of samsara

5 The path to liberation

5.1 The physical rebirth that will stop samsara



How is a disciple guided through the teachings of the lamrim, the path to enlightenment? The graduated path to enlightenment is divided into three: the graduated paths of the lower capable being, the middle capable being and the higher capable being. The lower capable being has the attitude and aim to completely cut off clinging to this life and achieve the happiness of future lives—just that. They achieve and practice their path by realizing the shortcomings of the ten nonvirtues and living in the ten virtues.

The middle capable being is someone with the attitude and aim to completely leave samsara behind. They don't have the slightest attraction to any aspect of samsara for even a second, seeing it as completely in the nature of suffering, as a nest of poisonous snakes or a pit of red-hot coals. Their aim is to achieve liberation through practicing the three higher trainings of morality, concentration and wisdom. This is the path of the middle capable being, who practices the three higher trainings on the basis of the path of the lower capable being—living in the ten virtues.

The attitude and aim of the higher capable being is to completely renounce working for self and to work only for others. Their one thought is to benefit other sentient beings and achieve enlightenment, and to achieve that they practice the path of the six perfections. Finally, on the basis of this, there is the practitioner of tantra. All the practices of these higher capable beings are based on the path of the lower and middle capable beings.

- A lower capable being aims for the happiness of future lives and practices the ten virtues
- A middle capable being aims to leave samsara and practices the three higher trainings
- A higher capable being works only for others and practices the six perfections

The evolution of samsara

5 The path to liberation

5.2 The three higher trainings

THE CAN be no liberation without the higher training of wisdom—a direct realization of emptiness—and that only comes about through the higher training of concentration. Neither of these two higher trainings is possible without the higher training of morality.

We can tell from our own experiences that moral conduct is extremely important. When our mind is very disturbed and unclear, it is very difficult to concentrate. With a mind overwhelmed by disturbing thoughts we cannot meditate at all. Even when we say prayers, we cannot meditate on their meaning. Our mind is like a bird swept along by a strong wind, unable to stay still in space for even one minute. Another example is examining a thangka at night by the light of a butter lamp. To dispel darkness, the lamp needs not only to be bright but also unmoved by any wind. No matter how bright it is, a flickering light will not reveal the painting's details. Similarly, only when our concentration is stable and free from subtle distractions can we use the unmoving brightness of insight to see reality as it is and overcome all delusions. Neither of these things can happen when the mind is agitated and distracted by sense objects stemming from a lack of morality.

Shakyamuni Buddha himself said that morality will be our guide after he had passed into the sorrowless state, or *parinirvana*. For us beginners the three higher trainings are very advanced, something we can only aspire to. However even if single-pointed concentration and the wisdom directly realizing emptiness are beyond us at this moment, we can definitely practice the training of morality by taking and keeping the pratimoksha vows.

- Morality is a prerequisite for the two higher trainings of concentration and wisdom
- Without good moral conduct our mind is like a windblown bird or a flickering light
- Even as beginners we can train in morality by taking and keeping the pratimoksha vows

The evolution of samsara
5 The path to liberation
5.3 The higher training of morality

THE ESSENTIAL thing is to protect our karma, and there is no surer way of doing that than taking vows. We gain great benefit when we refrain from even one small nonvirtue. Say we resist the temptation to take something we really like. We have broken that cycle of want-and-take and we won't have to experience the four suffering results of that particular action in the future. If, however, we have taken the vow not to steal, the results are much more powerful and far-reaching.

Taking a vow to refrain from various types of nonvirtue is a wonderful and powerful way to purify our mind, but if the vow is just words in our head it means little. Along with the formal taking of the vow we must develop a strong determination not to commit the action again. Keeping a vow that we made in front of our guru or the Buddha creates incredibly strong positive imprints, which propel us along the path to enlightenment.

By living in discipline through having taken various vows, we greatly strengthen our mind. Taking a set of vows in front of a holy object or a teacher is a huge responsibility. The weight of it is there all the time, and if our mind bends toward committing a negative action, we can feel that responsibility: we are harming not only that sentient being who is the object of our action but also our teacher and our own mind. Just as we would never think of harming our dearest friend, we could never harm our spiritual friend, and thus we have much more impetus not to commit that action.

- The essential thing is to protect our karma, and taking vows is the best way to do that
- Along with our vows we must develop a strong determination to refrain from nonvirtue
- The vows we take will strengthen our mind and help us avoid harming others

The evolution of samsara

5 The path to liberation

5.3 The higher training of morality



RENOUNCING ATTACHMENT to this life means renouncing the cause of suffering. It does not mean turning our back on our friends and family or discarding our material possessions. We don't have to make a huge bonfire of our clothes or throw our books and CDs over a cliff. What it means is not having attachment to all these things. If we have renounced attachment to this life, we can have all the wealth in the world and it won't affect us at all. We renounce attachment to the happiness of this life and because of that we gain a far greater happiness.

Many times each day we are confronted by different situations, meeting potentially attractive or repulsive objects—the angry boss, the praising colleague, the delicious chocolate cake, the sudden rainstorm—each waiting to lead us into a mind of desire or irritation or any of the other deluded states, each waiting to create the see-saw of our attached life. We don't have to react to these situations in that way, however. Rather than giving in to attachment to this life, we can see how it is suffering and turn our back on it.

We see that by practicing a little bit of Dharma we attain more than a little bit of real happiness, and we can see that as we are able to integrate the Dharma more into our life, true happiness will increase more and more. Right now, the work ahead of us is to notice when attachment arises and to avert it, slowly developing renunciation of the attachment that clings to this life. Then all the other realizations will follow.

- If we have renounced attachment to this life, all the wealth in the world won't affect us
- We can choose to turn our back on the suffering see-saw of our attached life
- As we integrate the Dharma into our life, our happiness will increase more and more

The evolution of samsara

Wrap-up

WE HAVE to understand the message of the Buddha and transform our mind from one of suffering and delusion to one of everlasting happiness. That means only creating virtue and never creating nonvirtue. We can't expect happiness while creating the causes for suffering. That is like putting our hand in a raging fire and expecting not to get burnt.

Therefore, to practice Dharma we must observe our karma, which means being aware of what is virtue and nonvirtue, and creating only one while refraining from the other. To understand that, we must have a very clear idea about what is suffering in order to avoid it. If we think that the enjoyment of sense pleasures is real happiness, of course we won't have any energy to resist doing that. This is why it is so important to understand fully all the levels of suffering and make the determination to be free from them.

When we do that, it is definitely possible to transform the mind. Past habits may be difficult to change—they have been with us for countless lifetimes, after all—but we can do it because the mind is malleable, like the soft clay from which we can make any shape we want, an ugly lump or a beautiful vase. But the mind is not like soft clay in that it is not made of atoms; it is mere energy, it is merely that which is clear and knowing and therefore does not have the restrictions of physical matter. There is no limit to what the mind is capable of. Enlightenment might seem like an impossible goal but it is very possible.

- The way to transform our mind from suffering to happiness is to create only virtue
- By developing a very clear understanding of suffering we will know how to avoid it
- The mind is mere energy and can be transformed in any way we choose, without limit

IF WE don't understand our own problems and know how to help ourselves, how can we possibly think we can help others? We're just being emotional: no wisdom, no method; we're just joking. First, we must realize our own situation: "It's not just me; countless beings on this earth are in the same situation, full of misconceptions, and, as a result, are greatly conflicted both physically and mentally." Our minds are full of conflict and when that mental energy transmutes into the physical level, our bodies also get sick. In that way, all sickness comes from a diseased mind; the sick mind manifests as a sick body.

So the way to expand love and compassion is to first understand ourselves; then we can relate to all other living beings. That's good. The problem is that much of the time we don't even have compassion for ourselves, we don't comprehend ourselves, so how can we then have love and compassion for others? It's impossible. Even if we say we love others, it's just words, emotion. We say, "I love you," but true love first has to be for ourselves. We have to know our own situation, what we are. This leads to sincere love for ourselves, and from that, sincere love for others. Without doing it that way, we're joking.

We need to check how our life is, how we think, what sort of mistakes we make and how our misconceptions are related to what we experience. We should analyze how all that happens and how it's related to attachment. By realizing that, instead of then worrying about our own problems we can see that all universal living beings are in the same situation. Then automatically, intuitively, love and compassion ensue.

- Without understanding and addressing our own problems, we can't help others
- The way to expand love and compassion is to first understand and love ourselves
- By seeing our own problems, love and compassion will naturally arise for all living beings

The evolution of samsara

Wrap-up

YOU MUST have seen thangkas of the Wheel of Life; they're very common. There are many details, but at the center there's a pig with a chicken's tail feathers in its mouth. The chicken's beak holds the tail of a snake, while the snake is shown biting the tail of the pig. The Wheel of Life is not just some item of Tibetan culture. It's a deeply symbolic teaching and was created by Lord Buddha himself.

Once, some disciples were looking for a gift to send to a neighboring, non-Buddhist king. Lord Buddha told them how to make a painting of the Wheel of Life and suggested they send it to the king simply as a work of art, without any other explanation. After receiving this gift, the king kept looking and looking at it, until one day he realized what it represented. The art itself spoke to him. He realized that ego, attachment and aversion were the worst of all poisons and the cause of all suffering. If we, too, keep Dharma art in our room, it can have a similarly beneficial effect on our mind.

In the Wheel of Life, the pig symbolizes ignorance, the chicken, craving desire, and the snake, hatred. It's a perfect external demonstration of how, starting with ignorance, delusions develop in the mind. This has nothing whatsoever to do with any Eastern trip, any lama trip or any other kind of trip and it applies equally to all samsaric beings. Lord Buddha's key discovery was that the pollution of ignorance is the root of all problems, and from ignorance come attachment, craving desire and hatred.

- The Wheel of Life is a deeply symbolic teaching created by Lord Buddha himself
- As Dharma art, it showed a king how the three poisons are the cause of suffering
- The pig, chicken and snake symbolize ignorance, craving desire and hatred

IGNORANCE is the root of samsara and the source of all the other links of dependent origination. In the Wheel of Life, this first link is depicted as a blind man walking with the aid of a stick. This is how we are: stumbling blindly through samsara making one mistake after another because we constantly hold the concept of a truly existent I and misread how this I and all other things exist.

Ignorance can be looked at in two ways: ignorance of how things exist, and ignorance of karma. Ignorance of karma arises from the fundamental ignorance of how things exist, and when we destroy this fundamental ignorance, ignorance of karma naturally ceases. Ignorance of how things exist means not understanding how all things are dependent arisings—that they arise in dependence on causes and conditions—and not understanding how all things lack any sense of true or inherent existence. This is the level of ignorance that binds us to samsara.

Due to ignorance, *karma* is created, and due to karma, *consciousness* comes into existence. With consciousness comes conception (also called *name and form*) where the *six senses* develop, which in turn give rise to *contact* with the objects of consciousness. This creates *feeling*, which leads to *craving* and *grasping*. Craving and grasping are the key links at the time when we leave this body, causing us to jump from the body of our current life, which is now a corpse, to a new body. This is the link of *becoming*. From this comes *rebirth*, and, finally all that is left is *aging and death*. This is the evolution or mechanism that traps us in cyclic existence.

- *Ignorance* refers to our wrong concepts and is symbolized by a blind man
- There are two types: ignorance of how things exist and ignorance of karma
- Ignorance sets in motion the twelve links, which trap us in samsara

The twelve links of dependent origination

1 *Ignorance*

IGNORANCE generates *karmic formation*, which is symbolized by a man producing clay pots. Just as a clay pot can be fashioned into many sizes and shapes, different karmic actions bring different results. In that way, karma can either be virtuous, nonvirtuous or neutral. Karma is motivated by ignorance, and the most important point is that it produces a result, one that is concordant with the cause.

A key feature of karma is that it has the power to throw us into a future rebirth. Positive karma brings rebirth in the upper realms and negative karma brings rebirth in the lower realms. This is true for all sentient beings except arya beings—those who have achieved the path of seeing, the third of the five paths that lead to enlightenment. They have eliminated sufficient craving and grasping to not create the karma that results in an uncontrolled rebirth in samsara.

As an example, suppose we create the karma to be born as a chicken. This is a karmic formation produced by ignorance. As soon as ignorance has created the action, the karmic imprint to be born as a chicken is left on our consciousness. Just before death, craving and grasping arise for a further existence. If the karma to be reborn as a chicken is the strongest imprint on our mindstream, then this is the link of becoming that we will experience. From this inevitably follows birth as a chicken, as well as all the other suffering results.

- *Karmic formation* is symbolized by a man producing clay pots
- Karma has the power to throw us uncontrollably into our next rebirth
- If at death our strongest karma is for rebirth as a chicken, then that is what will happen

The twelve links of dependent origination

2 *Karmic formation*



KARMIC FORMATION generates *consciousness*, the third link, which is symbolized by a monkey with fruit in its hand swinging from tree to tree. This demonstrates how consciousness, bearing karmic imprints, connects past to present and present to future. Consciousness functions as the relationship between our past karmic actions and our present life's experiences and between our present life's actions and our future experiences.

In the context of the twelve links, consciousness refers to the principal consciousness with its attendant throwing karma—the specific karmic action that projects the mind into the next life, ripening to send us into a particular rebirth. It is ignorance that creates the karmic formations, which are then all carried on the consciousness. If there were no consciousness, the rest could not happen. Just as a monkey jumps from tree to tree, so consciousness goes from life to life. Consciousness is the result and consciousness is the cause.

Our consciousness holds billions upon billions of karmic imprints, which are the results of all the positive and negative actions, both large and small, that we have carried out over our countless lifetimes. Many of these imprints have the potential to create a particular future rebirth if they ripen at the moment of death—for example, to become an animal, a god, a hell being or a human being with a perfect human rebirth. And not only do we have an unbelievable number of imprints on our consciousness from previous lifetimes; every second we are planting countless more.

- *Consciousness* is symbolized by a monkey carrying fruit and swinging from tree to tree
- The principal consciousness goes from life to life and determines our next rebirth
- Our consciousness holds billions of karmic imprints and we are creating billions more

CONSCIOUSNESS generates *name and form*, which is symbolized by a man rowing a boat. *Name* is the four mental aggregates of feeling, discrimination, compositional factors and consciousness and *form* is the form aggregate—here, the fertilized egg. Only beings born in the formless realm have name but no form.

Just as a rower requires a boat, oars, a river and so forth, so the I that is the center of our universe requires name and form, or the five aggregates. Wherever the boat goes, the person goes; wherever the aggregates go, the I, which is nothing more than the name given to those aggregates, goes. And just as the boat is temporary—nothing more than a means to get the rower across the river or lake—the body is also a temporary home for this traveler who moves from one life to another. Like an overnight lodging house, this body is nothing to get attached to.

In the case of a mammal, name and form occurs at the coming together of consciousness and fertilized egg to begin the process of gestation. It is the very beginning of the being we are in this life, before the six senses have been developed. Unfortunately, we bring the delusions with us in the form of the karmic imprints from our previous life. A human rebirth is very fortunate, but nonetheless it is still caused by delusion and karma. From the very first second of conception, the aggregates we take on are born from the seed of delusion and karma.

- *Name and form*, a man rowing a boat, refers to the coming together of the five aggregates
- Without name and form—the five aggregates—there would be no person
- The aggregates we take on are born from the seed of delusion and karma



NAME AND FORM generate the *six sense bases*, which are symbolized by an empty house with six openings, usually shown as five windows and one door. From a distance the house looks fully occupied, but it is empty. Similarly, the six sense bases are meaningless without an object.

These subtle inner sense faculties are situated within the gross sense organs—the tongue sense base is in the tongue, the eye sense base is in the eyeball and so forth—but they are not physical in the same way as the gross organs. They are part of what is called the subtle body. For example, when a flower is the object of consciousness, the eyeball is the gross organ that enables the mind to apprehend that object and the eye sense base is the way that the consciousness, riding on the wind energy, actually experiences the flower and discriminates its color and shape.

It may appear that external objects consist of forms, smells, sounds and so forth, but we can see how the process has its origins in the mind. All the things that we experience are really products of our own mind, because each experience is created by our own sense base making contact with an external object through the gross sense organ. Pleasant or unpleasant smells, beautiful or ugly sights, and delicious or disgusting tastes are all products of our mind, and whether they bring about a good or bad experience depends on whether positive or negative karmic imprints ripen in relation to that object. In this way, the experience of the object comes from our own karma, which in turn comes from our fundamental ignorance, and none of this can happen without the consciousness.

- The *six sense bases* are symbolized by an empty house with six openings
- These subtle inner sense faculties are part of what is called the subtle body
- Everything we experience depends on our sense bases and thereby on our mind

The twelve links of dependent origination

5 *The six senses*

THE SIX SENSES generate *contact*. This is symbolized by the contact of a man and a woman—the meeting of the senses with their objects. There are six types of contact, one for each of the five sense bases and one for the mental sense base. The definition of contact is one of the six sense bases of the deluded consciousness meeting and experiencing the object through its own capacity. Contact is the necessary link between having a sense base that can apprehend an object and developing a feeling about that object.

The term “contact” does not refer to the physical contact of the gross sense organ with the external object. It is easy to see that the eyeball does not actually need to touch the object, but neither does the tongue tasting food constitute contact. What is being referred to here is the sense consciousness connecting with the object based on this physical contact. For example: a hot pan might touch the skin, but the link of contact is created when the mind registers this physical event. This will then lead to the link of feeling, which in this case will be unpleasant.

Our world is full of interesting and uninteresting sounds, pleasant and unpleasant smells and beautiful and ugly sights. However, before we can experience these we first have to make contact with them. For the eye to see, the eye sense base has to make contact with the shape and color of the object through the gross eye organ, the eyeball. Almost immediately afterward we develop feelings toward this object based on past karma. Object, sense base and consciousness must all meet for this to happen.

- *Contact* is symbolized by the meeting of the sex organs of a man and a woman
- The link of contact is created when the mind registers a physical event
- Object, sense base and consciousness must all meet for contact to take place

The twelve links of dependent origination

6 *Contact*



CONTACT generates *feeling* or sensation, which is symbolized by a man with an arrow in his eye, who is suffering because of his contact with an object. Without contact there is no feeling. There are three kinds of feeling: pleasurable, painful and neutral, which can also be seen as happiness, suffering and indifference. Pleasurable feelings give rise to attachment; painful feelings give rise to aversion and hatred, and neutral feelings give rise to apathy and ignorance.

The object with which the consciousness makes contact is not inherently beautiful, ugly or boring, or inherently good, bad or neutral—it's the mind that makes it so. As we have seen, everything comes from the mind, like a film projected onto a movie screen. Two people can see the same object and for one it is beautiful while for the other it is ugly. If the beauty came from the object, then everybody would have the same feeling toward that object all the time, which of course is not so.

To see something as inherently beautiful or ugly—or as good or bad—and not to see it as merely a mental creation is to open ourselves up to all sorts of suffering. This is why it is important to understand how feelings arise from contact, which in turn arises from the karma created by delusion.

- *Feeling* is symbolized by a man who is suffering from having an arrow in his eye
- Pleasurable, painful and neutral feelings arise in dependence on our mind
- Seeing an object as inherently good or bad opens us up to all kinds of suffering

The twelve links of dependent origination

7 *Feeling*



CONTACT and *feeling* generate *craving*, which is symbolized by a man drinking wine. Just as the man's thirst is never satisfied, so the person deluded by greed is never satisfied and craves more things. This greed ruins the present life and will ruin many future lives. Generally, craving is divided into three: *craving for sense pleasures*, *craving for freedom from fear* and *craving for existence*.

The first, craving for sense pleasures, is quite easy to understand. All the time we chase pleasant experiences, whether a beautiful sunset or an enjoyable relationship. We not only crave to have pleasant things but we also crave not to be separated from them. For many people, this is what life is all about. The second one is craving for freedom from fear, such as the strong fear that animals and many poor and oppressed people face every day—the fear of hunger, thirst, death, torture and so forth. It also includes the wish to be free from the fear of meeting unpleasant objects and of not getting our way, which is experienced by more fortunate people such as us.

Craving for existence is the strongest and most fundamental craving. In the face of death, we become terrified of becoming nonexistent. This craving for existence is the mind that leads to the next link—grasping—which determines that we take another body. And as we have seen in the section on karmic formation, the kind of body that we take is in turn determined by which karma ripens at the moment of death. Among the billions and billions of karmic imprints on our mindstream, whatever is strongest will ripen. Craving and the next link—grasping—are the determining factors.

- *Craving* is symbolized by a man drinking wine yet never satisfying his thirst
- Our life is pervaded by craving for sense pleasures and freedom from fear
- The strongest craving is for existence, which leads to grasping and becoming



CRAVING generates *grasping*, which is symbolized by a monkey picking fruit from a tree. Having tasted one fruit, the monkey clammers over the tree looking for more and more. Grasping is created by craving and causes us to perform nonvirtuous actions in an attempt to satisfy our greed, hatred and ignorance, bringing much suffering. For example, the thought of alcohol is very pleasant and so we crave a drink. If that was all there was, it wouldn't be too bad, but that craving strengthens until we need to do something about it. This is grasping—the mind that reaches out to its object of desire. Grasping strengthens the attachment and makes us determined to buy that bottle of whiskey and drink it.

In the sutras, the Buddha lists four different types of grasping: *grasping at sense pleasures*, *grasping at the wrong view of denying what exists*, *grasping at the wrong view of holding our own beliefs as superior* and *grasping at the wrong view of the sense of a self-existent I*. These four types of grasping relate closely to the extreme views cited by Buddhist philosophers.

Craving and grasping are so close that we often see them as synonymous. As soon as there is craving, grasping arises. As soon as the thought of chocolate arises, the craving for it arises, and as soon as the craving arises the grasping arises. Craving brings the wish to experience that pleasant sensation, and grasping brings the determination to achieve that wish. These two links are especially strong at the time of death, when our terror of annihilation and our craving for existence become the grasping that moves us to the next rebirth.

- *Grasping* is symbolized by a monkey clambering over a tree to find more fruit
- The Buddha lists four types of grasping, which relate to the extreme views
- As soon as craving arises, grasping ensues, and this moves us to our next rebirth

The twelve links of dependent origination

9 *Grasping*

GRASPING at the body generates the tenth link, *becoming*, which is symbolized by a pregnant woman. The definition of becoming is a deluded secondary mind that is in the nature of the ripening aspect, caused by ignorance arising through the power of karma and through the links of craving and grasping. “In the nature of the ripening aspect” means that the karma is no longer a seed or potential and that the result is being actualized due to these factors.

Acting as a set of three links, craving, grasping and becoming arise just before the result. We may have to wait eons before a particular set of links arises at death because there is much stronger karma blocking its emergence. For example, a dying human being will naturally crave another human existence, but the causes and conditions for a human rebirth are very rare and it is more likely that they will fall into the lower realms for many eons. The karma to be reborn as a human being is still there, but the set of craving, grasping and becoming that brings another human rebirth can only be actualized after all their negative karma has been purified.

With becoming, from the very moment of the consciousness joining with the sperm and egg of the next life’s parents, that consciousness is under the control of delusion and karma. During this life, at death and in the intermediate state we are controlled by delusion and karma, so of course when we enter our next rebirth this will still be the case. This is why we have suffered in samsara and why we will continue to suffer in samsara until we can break that continuum of delusion.

- *Becoming*, symbolized by a pregnant woman, signifies that our karma is ripening
- Craving, grasping and becoming arise as a set of links at the time of death
- From the moment of rebirth we are controlled by delusion and karma

BECONING generates *rebirth*, which is symbolized by a woman giving birth. The definition of rebirth is the union of the mental aggregates, with or without a form, in samsara, due to craving, grasping and becoming. The mental aggregates exist in the essence of the ripening aspect and are bound to samsara by delusion and karma.

There are four types of rebirth: *from a womb, from an egg, from heat or moisture* and *entering or spontaneous rebirth*. Rebirth from a womb and rebirth from an egg are obvious. Rebirth from heat or moisture is what happens to some tiny insects, which are born into wood, fruit or water without going through gestation within a mother's womb. For example, when an animal's body is left after it dies it soon fills with worms and maggots. The fourth type is entering rebirth, which is also called spontaneous or miraculous rebirth. With the exception of some hungry ghosts—who can be born from a womb—hell beings, most hungry ghosts, gods, beings of the form and formless realms and intermediate state beings are not born from a womb or from heat or moisture but spontaneously.

The imprints left on the consciousness determine how and when the mental aggregates of an intermediate state being join with the coming together of sperm and egg. The imprint is like a seed, made stronger by craving and grasping and brought to fruition at death—just as elements such as water, heat and so forth make the seed of a plant stronger and give it greater potentiality. The seed starting to sprout is equivalent to the link of becoming, and when it is fully formed this is the equivalent of rebirth.

- *Rebirth*, symbolized by a woman giving birth, is driven by craving, grasping and becoming
- The four types of rebirth are *from a womb, an egg, heat or moisture* and *entering or spontaneous*
- Rebirth is a like a fully formed plant that grows from the sprout of becoming

The twelve links of dependent origination

11 *Rebirth*



AGING AND DEATH are put together in one link symbolized by a man carrying a corpse. Aging doesn't necessarily mean old age: there are a vast number of beings who die before any of the marks of old age—white hair, wrinkles and so forth—ever appear. Aging starts from the second moment of the consciousness joining the fertilized egg, and it brings with it the inevitability of death. The definition of the link of aging is that the aggregates, which are under the control of delusion and karma, decay without choice. The definition of samsaric death is that the consciousness, which is under the control of delusion and karma, separates from the body without choice.

We are all in the process of getting old and dying. Some of us are aware of this, probably because there are strong physical manifestations of it, but many of us deny this basic fact and don't even want to hear the words "old age." Yet old age and death will happen to all of us, unless we die prematurely. Therefore we should face up to this reality now and use it to make the most of what we have.

No matter how much fear we have or how much we regret not having practiced Dharma and developed a good heart, death will happen. And of course, death is not the end, but the beginning of a new set of twelve links—the start of a new circle of suffering in which we will create countless more sets of cause and effect, digging ourselves deeper and deeper into the quagmire of samsara.

- *Aging and death* are symbolized by a man carrying a corpse
- Many of us deny the basic fact that we are in the process of getting old and dying
- Death is not the end, but the beginning of a new set of twelve suffering links



DUE TO IGNORANCE, EACH DAY, HOUR, MINUTE
AND SECOND WE CREATE KARMA, WHICH
TRIGGERS YET ANOTHER SET OF TWELVE LINKS
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

A CHAIN OF interdependent origination describes the process of rebirth from one suffering state of existence into another, and it cannot be completed in one life but requires either two or three.

Consider the karma we may be creating at this very moment. It might be especially virtuous, but done in ignorance of the way in which things really exist; for example, with strong I-consciousness or ego-grasping. This ignorance may be planting karmic formations in our consciousness for us to be reborn as a glorious deva. Now it might happen that at the time of our death the karma to be reborn a deva will not be as strong as the karma collected at some other time for rebirth as a dog. Thus, the craving, grasping and becoming links that come into play as we die will belong to another chain of interdependent origination. The karma to be reborn as a deva, however, is not lost. It is still carried in our consciousness, but will not be activated until some future death. In our very next life we will experience the seven remaining links as a dog. Eventually, however, the deva karma will come to the fore, and the three links at death and the seven of the following life will unfold in that way.

We have forged the first three links of an infinite number of chains, and unless we tame our mind, guard our behavior and eliminate our ignorance, we will be hauled into one suffering existence after another by these chains. Our mind is like the baggage car of a railway train. It goes from place to place and life to life collecting parcels of karma that must someday be delivered and paid for.

- A chain of interdependent origination requires two or three lives to be completed
- Karma is never lost, but there may be a delay before it is actually activated
- Unless we tame our mind, we will go from one suffering existence to another

The twelve links of dependent origination

Wrap-up

IN THE sequential approach, each link is a result of the previous one and a cause of the next. However, the overall functioning of the twelve links can be more clearly examined by dividing them into three types: the prime causes, the delusions; the karma that arises from the delusions; and the resulting suffering. According to this analysis, *ignorance, craving and grasping* are the afflicted minds that cause suffering; *karmic formation and becoming* are the karmic elements in the chain; and *consciousness, name and form, the six senses, contact, feeling, rebirth and aging and death* are the various sufferings we must endure as a result of delusion and karma.

We know many of the links—all the ones that we are experiencing in our current lifetime—very well. What we are not aware of, however, is how they all originated from craving, grasping and becoming in a previous lifetime, and that those three links were probably triggered by ignorance and karma from a lifetime prior to that.

What karma are we creating now? Are we ensuring another perfect human rebirth with every action we do or are we thoughtlessly grasping on to sense pleasures, clinging to this life alone, thus ensuring that our next life will be in the suffering realms? Are we breaking free from this prison of suffering or locking ourselves into the same old trip again and again and again? We can all see the undesirability of being a prisoner in a conventional prison, but it is billions of times worse to be in this prison of samsara in which we have trapped ourselves, and we can't see that at all.

- The twelve links can be divided into delusions, karma and suffering results
- The links we experience now are due to craving, grasping and becoming in former lives
- We must consider whether the karma we're creating now will free us or keep us trapped

The twelve links of dependent origination

Wrap-up



WE CAN use our understanding of the twelve links to explore our world and then slowly change it. Attachment—craving and then grasping—arises for a desirable object. If we explore this in the context of the twelve links, we will see that craving and grasping could only have arisen in dependence on the feeling that arose when we had contact with that object, due to one or more of the six sense bases. In turn, this could only have happened if there had been a previous karmic link with that object. Therefore, it all comes back to karma, and of course to the ignorance that underpins everything.

As we have seen, the beautiful object and the ugly object, the pleasant smell and the bad odor, the delightful music and the harsh, ugly sound are all products of our mind—projections created by karmic imprints on our mind. Just as a farmer is dependent on his field and his seeds, none of this would happen without the ignorance that produces it. Our whole universe is the creation of our own mind. There is no external force, like a god, that determines our happiness or suffering. Everything comes from the mind.

If the twelve links of dependent origination show us the complexity of samsara and how we are trapped in samsara by our fundamental ignorance, they also show us the way out. Because everything comes from the mind, we have incredible freedom. Because everything depends on karma, which means action, in every second of the day we have the choice whether to create virtuous or non-virtuous actions.

- We can use our understanding of the twelve links to explore and change our world
- All our experiences are a product of our mind and can be traced back to ignorance
- The twelve links show us the complexity of samsara and also show us the way out

The twelve links of dependent origination

Wrap-up

IF WE wish to reach the highest possible destination we must cultivate the highest possible motivation for following the spiritual path. In Buddhist terminology this supreme motivation is known as bodhicitta. It is the impulse to achieve full enlightenment in order to be of the most benefit to others. Only through dedicating ourselves to working for the happiness of all beings—in other words only by cultivating the open heart of bodhicitta—can we ever experience supreme happiness ourselves.

The dedicated attitude of bodhicitta is the powerful energy capable of transforming our mind completely. This can be shown to be true through our own experience; it is not something we have to believe in with blind faith. When we have developed bodhicitta in our heart all the good things in life are magnetically attracted to us and effortlessly pour down upon us like rain. At present, because our heart is filled with self-cherishing thoughts, all we seem to attract is misfortune. But with bodhicitta we automatically attract good friends, good food, good everything.

As His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said, if we are going to be selfish, at least be wisely selfish. What he means by this peculiar-sounding advice is that in a way bodhicitta is like a huge selfish attitude: when we dedicate ourselves to others with loving kindness, we get back far more happiness than we could ever experience otherwise. Ordinarily, we get so little happiness and it is easily lost. So if we want to be as happy as possible, the only thing to do is to dedicate ourselves wholeheartedly to the welfare of others.

- Bodhicitta is the supreme motivation to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of others
- The energy of bodhicitta transforms our mind and attracts all the good things in life
- The best way to be happy is to dedicate ourselves wholeheartedly to the welfare of others



BODHI MEANS “OPEN” AND CITTA MEANS “HEART,”
SO BODHICITTA MEANS HAVING AN OPEN HEART
—LAMA YESHE

BODHICITTA MEANS opening our heart to others as much as we can. Normally we do open our heart to others to some extent—everybody does—but here we’re talking about doing it with the highest destination in mind: the transcendent, universal aim of complete enlightenment. That’s the way we create space in our heart. So it’s very important.

We can see from our normal human relationships that when we’re uptight and closed to each other it’s extremely difficult to get along but when we open up and aim to achieve something more profound it’s much easier. If I’m in a relationship with you only for chocolate, when I don’t get my chocolate I’m going to get upset, aren’t I? From the Buddhist point of view, human beings are much more profound than that; we can achieve tremendous things. So bodhicitta is very important. We think it’s important to become a great meditator but that’s very difficult to accomplish in this modern world. These days it’s much more practical to open our heart to each other and make that our Dharma path.

Still, it’s a lot easier to say the words than to actually practice bodhicitta. Realizing bodhicitta is a process that requires continuous action and steady application rather than the occasional sporadic effort. The mind of bodhicitta no longer sees any objects of hatred or neurotic desire anywhere in the world and it obviously takes time to achieve the kind of equilibrium with all universal living beings that forms the basis of such a view. However, Buddhism is extremely practical and far-reaching and teaches an organic, gradual approach by which anybody can become truly healthy, completely free from any problem, by developing the universal thought of enlightenment.

- Bodhicitta creates the space in our heart to be able to achieve complete enlightenment
- In the modern world, opening our heart to others is the most practical Dharma path
- Realizing bodhicitta is a gradual process that requires continuous and steady effort



THE THOUGHT of bodhicitta is unbelievable. It makes everything other than working for sentient beings boring and unsatisfying. There is no real interest or enjoyment in life apart from this. Anything else is meaningless, empty, essenceless.

When we cherish ourselves, think only of ourselves—"How can I be happy? How can I be free of problems?"—there is no happiness in our heart, only fear and worry. We see only problems and our mind is not relaxed. But in the next moment, when we change our object of concern to another sentient being—even if it is only one sentient being—suddenly our heart is released from self-cherishing, like limbs released from chains. As soon as our object of concern changes from ourselves to someone else, our heart is released from the bondage of the self-cherishing thought. As soon as we change the object of our cherishing, there is suddenly peace in the very depths of our heart. At the very moment our mind changes from self-cherishing to cherishing others, there is liberation, freedom from the tight bondage of the selfishness.

What is called "I" is the object to be abandoned forever; what is called "others"—even one sentient being—is the object to be cherished forever. This is why living our life for others—dedicating our life to even one sentient being—gives the greatest enjoyment and the most interesting life. Real happiness in life starts when we cherish others. Living our life for others, cherishing them with loving kindness and compassion, is the door to happiness, the door to enlightenment.

- Nothing is more interesting, enjoyable or meaningful than the thought of bodhicitta
- Switching our object of concern from ourselves to others brings us freedom and peace
- Cherishing others is the door to happiness and enlightenment



WE CALL ourselves Mahayanists, but just ascribing to Mahayana philosophy does not make one a Mahayanist. *Maha* means great and *yana* means vehicle; to be a Mahayanist we have to possess the great vehicle attitude in our heart. What is the great vehicle attitude? It is bodhicitta, the innermost, pure, universal thought, the determination to reach enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Then the Mahayana is like a boat that carries us across the ocean of samsara to enlightenment.

As we are practicing and studying Mahayana Buddhism we might say, with some partisanship, “I am a Mahayanist,” but if we do not have bodhicitta we are not Mahayanists. People think Mahayana and Hinayana are some kind of philosophy or doctrine, but while they do contain philosophy and doctrine, it is much more than that. Simply put, if we are concerned only for ourselves and not for others, even though we spend a lifetime at a Mahayana center, if our attitude does not change, it does not help; we cannot solve our problems.

What I am saying here is that if we have the enlightenment attitude of bodhicitta, that is the real guarantee, the vehicle to carry us into enlightenment, there is no doubt about that. For that reason, when Lord Buddha taught the Mahayana he gave much emphasis to the pure thought of bodhicitta.

- The Mahayana vehicle is not defined by philosophy but by the bodhicitta attitude
- If we are only concerned for ourselves we are not Mahayanists
- The Buddha emphasized bodhicitta because that is what guarantees us enlightenment

Bodhicitta

1 The ten benefits of bodhicitta

1.1 Bodhicitta is the sole gateway to the Mahayana



THE BUDDHAS are all overjoyed when a being becomes a bodhisattva, calling them a child of the buddhas because they are just like a prince, destined to become a great ruler. Even before he is able to communicate or walk, a prince is still more important and more revered than the highest noble by way of his potential. In the same way, the new bodhisattva has the potential to realize enlightenment and serve all sentient beings. Nothing could make the buddhas happier.

The very moment we attain the mind of bodhicitta we become a holy being to be revered by all. All other humans and higher samsaric gods will prostrate to and admire us, no matter what our external appearance might be. In the *Jewel Lamp* Khunu Lama Rinpoche says that bodhicitta is the highest beauty and it doesn’t matter how ugly or poor we are by worldly standards, we become an object of reverence because of our amazing altruistic mind. A bodhisattva might be a penniless, filthy beggar, with torn rags for clothes and dirty matted hair; they might be a hippie, skinny and dirty, shunned by everybody, looking and acting completely crazy; they might have leprosy and be a despised outcast. But the very second that person generates bodhicitta they are considered a holy being, an object of veneration, surpassing even an arhat, who has realized emptiness and removed all gross delusions.

Just as a child is physically created by the union of father and mother, we attain bodhicitta through taking refuge in the Three Rare Sublime Ones—Buddha, Dharma and Sangha—and become a buddha by depending on the buddhas, particularly the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, his teachings and his Sangha.

- A bodhisattva is called a child of the buddhas due to their great potential to serve others
- Whatever their appearance, a bodhisattva is a holy being and an object of veneration
- Just as a child depends on its parents, we are dependent on the Three Rare Sublime Ones

Bodhicitta

1 The ten benefits of bodhicitta

1.2 We gain the name “child of the buddhas”

WITH BODHICITTA we outshine the arhats: the hearers and the solitary realizers. The arhats have incredible qualities but what they lack is the great will of the bodhisattvas, the supreme determination to take care of each and every sentient being more than themselves and to lead them to full enlightenment.

Pabongka Dechen Nyingpo explained that arhats enter a completely blissful state of peace in equipoise meditation and that because they are habituated to the taste of absorption in that blissful state they don't attempt to generate bodhicitta. For an arhat to even try to generate bodhicitta would be difficult because they have totally transcended suffering and so can no longer use their own suffering as an example to understand the suffering of others. It's good to understand this point. Without experiencing suffering an arhat has difficulty generating great compassion for others. It's not that arhats have no compassion for other sentient beings. Compared to the tiny compassion we might have, theirs is enormous. They have the strong wish that all sentient beings are free from suffering and have happiness, but what they lack is this extra wish, this responsibility that they take the whole burden upon themselves. This is the quality that makes the difference.

When arhats are absorbed in the blissful state of peace, they experience such inconceivable happiness that they remain in equipoise meditation for many eons before awakening to enter the Mahayana path. During the length of time an arhat stays in that blissful state, a sentient being in the hells could have experienced the suffering of the hell realm, fully exhausted that karma and been reborn as a human with a perfect human rebirth, entered the Mahayana path and achieved enlightenment.

- Arhats have many qualities but lack the will to care for others more than themselves
- It's very difficult for an arhat to leave their blissful state of peace and generate bodhicitta
- While arhats remain in meditation, other beings can progress from hell to enlightenment

Bodhicitta

1 The ten benefits of bodhicitta

1.3 We outshine the arhats



WHEN WE become a bodhisattva we become a supreme object of offering for all sentient beings. Other beings accumulate incredible merit by making offerings to us and we ourselves accumulate incredible merit. The higher the realizations we have, the more merit we create and the more merit others create by making offerings to us.

The ground where a bodhisattva walks, their footprint in the dust, becomes an object of prostration for gods and humans due to the power of this precious thought, bodhicitta. Even universal kings of the gods, Indra and Brahma, touch their crowns to the footprint of a bodhisattva in respect. The Buddha himself said, “Those who devote themselves to me should prostrate to the bodhisattvas not the buddhas.” He also said, “Even if a bodhisattva wanted to travel by chariot purely for his own pleasure, I would willingly pull it for him.” Arhats might have attained the blissful state that lasts eons but they do not earn the same respect as a new bodhisattva because the bodhisattva is only concerned with the welfare of others. The whole body of a bodhisattva, from the tip of the head including every hair down to the toes, becomes an object of veneration, a holy object, a relic. Also, whatever comes from the body—blood, *pipi* or *kaka*—becomes blessed. When other beings use it, it purifies them, they are healed.

Even if it takes lifetimes, this is the great project we should determine to do. We should concentrate only on this, putting all our energies there. This life passes very quickly, so we might fail to attain bodhicitta before we die, but then, if we keep working, we can certainly attain it in the next life.

- A bodhisattva is the supreme object of offering for all sentient beings
- Indra, Brahma and the Buddha himself pay homage to someone who has bodhicitta
- Attaining bodhicitta is our great project and we must concentrate only on this

Bodhicitta

1 The ten benefits of bodhicitta

1.4 We become a supreme object of offering



WITHOUT BODHICITTA it is very difficult to collect merits. We create them and immediately destroy them; by afternoon, the morning's merits have gone. It's like cleaning a room and an hour later making it dirty again. We make our mind clean, then right away we mess it up—not a very profitable business. With bodhicitta we become very precious—like gold, like diamonds. We become the most perfect object in the world, beyond compare with any material things.

Do you recall the story of Shantideva and how people used to put him down? They used to call him the one who knows how to do only three things: eat, sleep and excrete. This was a very bad thing to call someone, especially a monk. But that's all people saw him doing. However, he had bodhicitta, so whatever he did, even ordinary things, were of greatest benefit to others. Lying down peacefully, he would meditate with great concern for the welfare of all living beings, and many times, out of compassion, he would cry for them. Westerners need that kind of practice.

From the Western materialistic point of view, we'd think it was great if a rich person said, "I want to make charity. I'm going to offer one hundred dollars to everybody in the entire world." Yet even if that person gave with great sincerity, their merit would be nothing compared with just the thought, "I want to actualize bodhicitta for the sake of sentient beings and I'll practice the six perfections as much as I can." That's why I always say actualization of bodhicitta is the most perfect path we can take.

- Unless we have bodhicitta, we create merits and then constantly destroy them
- Because Shantideva had bodhicitta, even his ordinary activities were of great benefit
- Simply the wish to actualize bodhicitta creates more merit than the greatest act of charity

Bodhicitta

1 The ten benefits of bodhicitta

1.5 We accumulate enormous merit with ease

THE WONDERFUL mind of bodhicitta makes it possible to purify all the powerful nonvirtues that cannot be purified by other virtuous activities. The reason that very few of us worldly beings have been able to overcome negativity is because the virtue we've created is so feeble in comparison to our nonvirtue and because we haven't created the powerful virtue of bodhicitta. We are unable to control the arising of negative minds and therefore can't avoid negative actions and the suffering consequences of those actions. We are so habituated to negativity that other methods of purification are too weak. Only the mind of enlightenment, bodhicitta, is strong enough to overcome these negative minds.

Of all the tools that the Dharma gives us, bodhicitta best prevents us from following harmful minds because it destroys our self-cherishing, the root of the problem. Bodhicitta is extremely powerful. Without bodhicitta our nonvirtues will always flourish; with bodhicitta we can quickly overcome them. Bodhicitta is like the fire at the end of an eon that destroys the whole universe and burns everything up, even Mount Meru. Similarly, negative karma and obscurations are all completely burnt up in the intense fire of bodhicitta. The great teachers say that just one meditation session of training in bodhicitta will leave an impression on the mind that is more powerful and beneficial than a hundred years of continuous purification without bodhicitta motivation.

Just as criminals need to confess their crimes to an influential person, similarly we need to face up to our negative actions and confess them in purification practices. The stronger our bodhicitta motivation, the stronger and more effective our confession will be. With a strong bodhicitta motivation, strong negativities created over several lifetimes can be purified in a very short time.

- Bodhicitta purifies powerful nonvirtues that cannot be purified in any other way
- By destroying our self-cherishing, bodhicitta prevents us from following harmful minds
- Confessing with a strong bodhicitta motivation will quickly purify our negativities

Bodhicitta

1 The ten benefits of bodhicitta

1.6 We rapidly purify negative karma and obscurations



WITH BODHICITTA WE CAN EASILY ACCOMPLISH
WHATEVER WE WISH WITHOUT BEING BOTHERED
BY INTERNAL OR EXTERNAL HINDRANCES
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

ANOTHER BENEFIT of bodhicitta is that we accomplish whatever we wish. That means whatever work we undertake will be completely successful. Not only that, because we are working solely for others, whatever we do will be completed without much effort.

Many worldly problems that we find difficult to overcome—harm from humans and nonhumans such as spirits as well as the elements—can be easily overcome when we have bodhicitta. A bodhisattva can cure others' diseases very easily by simple actions such as giving leftover food or drink or blowing on a sick person. Even drinking the pipi of a bodhisattva can cure disease. In the refugee camp, Buxa Duar, where I spent eight years, the local Indian people suffered greatly from either too much rain or not enough, depending on whether the monsoons came or failed. The people began to rely on the monks to help them. When there was a drought the monks would go down to the river and do a short puja, and very often before they had returned to the monastery there would be rain. Whether it rained or not depended on spirits such as nagas interfering with the lives of the farmers because they were disturbed in some way. By the monks doing pujas, through the power of the bodhicitta generated, the spirits would be pleased and so the rains could come.

Both levels of attainment are possible when we generate bodhicitta: the final, complete elimination of our own suffering and the ability to relieve all beings of theirs. Whatever happiness we wish for is ours, from mundane happiness to the happiness of the god realms, from the great happiness of nirvana all the way to the ultimate state of full enlightenment.

- With bodhicitta, whatever we undertake will be effortless and completely successful
- Many worldly problems are easily overcome through the power of bodhicitta
- Generating bodhicitta brings the ability to eliminate both our own and others' suffering

Bodhicitta

1 The ten benefits of bodhicitta

1.7 We accomplish whatever we wish

A FURTHER BENEFIT of bodhicitta is that we cannot be harmed by either internal disturbances such as distractions or external harms such as other humans and nonhumans. It's said in the teachings that the universal kings, the extremely rich and powerful kings of the gods, have to have many protectors to guard them while they are sleeping but a bodhisattva naturally has twice as many protectors protecting them day and night, keeping them safe from spirits and other distractions. This is not something they aim for but just a byproduct of attaining bodhicitta.

When a bodhisattva comes to a place, even one made terrible by malevolent spirits, that place can be transformed, made very quiet and tranquil, losing its violent atmosphere. The droughts, famines and catastrophes that occur because of the spirits are stopped by the bodhisattva's influence. Walking through a forest full of dangers such as tigers or poisonous snakes, a bodhisattva is protected by the precious thought of bodhicitta; the wild creatures become subdued. The great saint, St. Francis of Assisi, showed this. There was a wolf living in the forest giving a lot of harm to the people who had to travel through it. St. Francis went to talk to the wolf despite the warnings of the people that he would be killed. However, when he approached the wolf it became very docile, like a dog who wants food from its master, lying in front of him and licking his feet.

Outer disturbances are controlled by bodhicitta because it destroys the main distraction that lives within our own mind, the delusions. External hindrances—spirits and so forth—cannot disturb the bodhisattva, and neither can inner hindrances, the delusions themselves.

- A bodhisattva can't be harmed by either internal or external disturbances
- A byproduct of attaining bodhicitta is that a bodhisattva is always safe from danger
- Outer disturbances are controlled by bodhicitta because it destroys our inner hindrances

Bodhicitta

1 The ten benefits of bodhicitta

1.8 We are not bothered by hindrances



WITH BODHICITTA, every action creates infinite merit so we naturally attain the entire path to enlightenment quickly. Becoming a bodhisattva, we engage in the six perfections and the four means of drawing disciples to the Dharma and we quickly progress through the five paths. Then we are quickly able to complete the two merits of method and wisdom and achieve the two kayas, the dharmakaya and the rupakaya, the holy mind and holy body of a buddha. Without bodhicitta we might be able to complete the merit of wisdom but never the merit of method.

When we train in bodhicitta every action becomes a Dharma action. Awakening in the morning we remind ourselves that we are living in order to benefit others and then consequently nothing we do during the day is for our own self-interest. Everything we do is only for our attainment of enlightenment to help free all other sentient beings from suffering. The reason we are alive is to eliminate every suffering of every kind mother sentient being. With this motivation, every second of our life becomes incredibly meaningful, not narrow but infinite like the limitless sky. The purpose of every breath is this. It gives meaning to everything we do—eating, walking, sleeping, sitting; every action, big or small.

Whatever Mahayana path we take to enlightenment, the Paramitayana path or the Vajrayana path, bodhicitta is the vital ingredient. We can spend our whole life progressing through the two stages of Vajrayana, the generation stage and the completion stage, we can control the psychic winds and open the *chakras* and all these things, but without bodhicitta, none of this is even a Mahayana action let alone the cause for enlightenment.

- A bodhisattva will quickly complete the two merits of method and wisdom
- The motivation to free all beings from suffering gives great meaning to everything we do
- Without bodhicitta, even practicing Vajrayana won't become a cause of enlightenment

Bodhicitta

1 The ten benefits of bodhicitta

1.9 We quickly complete the stages of the path

IF SOMEBODY asks us what is our main practice, our heart practice in life, we should say bodhicitta. Usually, if somebody is asked what their main practice is they will give the name of a deity or say that it's *kundalini yoga* or concentrating on the winds and drops or something like that. But really, while everything else might be very worthwhile, our main practice has to be bodhicitta.

Cherishing others is the foundation of all the positive qualities we develop on the path to enlightenment. From that we attain the Mahayana path and progress through the five paths, attaining the ten *bhumis* as well as the two stages of Highest Yoga Tantra. On the basis of cherishing others, we become a buddha and have the infinite qualities of the holy body, holy speech and holy mind. Then, we are able to offer perfect work for all sentient beings without the slightest mistake. This is the incredible benefit we are able to offer all beings due to having renounced self-cherishing and turned our mind to cherishing others instead. When we consider it in this way we can see that our good heart cherishing others—this one person's good heart—is most precious, like a wish-granting jewel, bringing happiness to every single hell being, every single hungry ghost, every single animal, human, demigod, god and intermediate state being. What we achieve is unimaginable, priceless.

We should follow the examples of the bodhisattvas, seeing how they have trained to cherish others more than themselves. They should be our role models, showing us how to totally overcome all problems and attain sublime happiness for themselves and for others. Like that, we too will become a role model for others.

- Developing bodhicitta needs to be our main refuge and heart practice in this life
- Cherishing others is the foundation of all the positive qualities on the path
- Bodhisattvas are our role models, showing us how to attain happiness for self and others

Bodhicitta

1 The ten benefits of bodhicitta

1.10 We become a source of happiness for others



TO DISCOVER UNIVERSAL LOVE WITHIN OUR MIND,
WE HAVE TO DEVELOP A FEELING OF EQUILIBRIUM
WITH ALL LIVING BEINGS IN THE UNIVERSE
—LAMA YESHE

ONE OF the beauties of Buddhism is that it offers us a practical training for our mind. It does not say, “Bodhicitta is fantastic because Buddha said so!” Instead, it gives us the methods for developing such an attitude and we can then see for ourselves whether it works or not, whether it is fantastic or not.

According to these methods, the first thing we need is a sense of equanimity, or equilibrium. Just as level ground is the basis on which we build a house, so too is equanimity—an unbiased attitude toward all other beings—the foundation for cultivating bodhicitta. The experience of past meditators is that when we have achieved such equilibrium, we can cultivate bodhicitta quickly and easily. However, because our habit of discriminating sharply between friends, enemies and strangers is very deeply rooted within us, such even-mindedness is not easy to achieve. With our tremendous grasping desire we become attached to and cling to our dear friends, with aversion and hatred we reject those we do not like and with indifference we turn a blind eye to the countless people who appear to be neither helpful nor harmful to us. As long as our mind is under the control of such attachment, aversion and indifference, we will never be able to cultivate precious bodhicitta in our heart.

Equanimity is not an intellectual concept; it is not just another thought or idea to be played around with in our head. Rather, it is a state of mind, a specific quality of consciousness or awareness to be attained through constant familiarity. For this to happen we have to exert a great deal of effort. In other words, we have to train our mind and transform our basic attitude toward others.

- Buddhism offers us practical mind training methods that we can check out for ourselves
- The essential foundation is equanimity: an unbiased attitude toward all other beings
- Equanimity is a state of mind attained through effort and constant familiarity

Bodhicitta

2 The seven points of cause and effect

The basis: immeasurable equanimity



PERHAPS I should explain how to develop equilibrium. We do it in sitting meditation. Visualize in front of you a person who makes you agitated; someone you don't like. Visualize behind you the person to whom you are most attached. And visualize all around you the people to whom you feel indifferent.

Look at these three classes of person—friend, enemy and stranger—and meditate; see how you feel about each. When you look at your dear friend, a clinging feeling comes up; you want to go in that direction. When you look at the person who hurts and bothers you, you want to turn away; you reject that person. Just visualize them and see how you feel. Then ask yourself, "Why do I feel differently about different people? Why do I want to help the person I like and not the one I hate?" If you're honest, you'll find that your answers are the completely unreasonable responses of a deluded mind. Check up: visualize all universal living beings around you and realize that equally, just like you, they all want happiness and don't want unhappiness. Therefore, there's no reason to make the psychological distinction between friend and enemy, wanting to help the friend with extreme attachment and wanting to give up on the bothersome, conflict-generating enemy with extreme dislike. That kind of mind is completely unrealistic because as the dissatisfied human mind goes up and down, those kinds of relationship naturally change.

That's the approach to developing equilibrium, and the more we practice it, the more we'll realize that in reality, there's no reason to distinguish sentient beings as friend, enemy and stranger on the basis of the extremes of attachment and hatred; only an unhealthy mind does so.

- To develop equilibrium, we visualize friends, enemies and strangers around us
- We reflect on how we feel about them and check up whether we're being realistic
- The more we do this, the more we'll see there's no reason to make these distinctions

Bodhicitta

2 The seven points of cause and effect

The basis: immeasurable equanimity



FEELING EQUILIBRIUM with all living beings without discrimination is not something that we just make up. We're not trying to equalize something that's inherently unequal. What we're trying to do is to realize as equal that which is already equal. We're trying to overcome the distortion of inequality projected by our two departments of ego and attachment that cause us to experience the two extremes of craving desire and intense dislike. Just look around. Who among us doesn't want happiness and enjoyment? We all do. And who among us wants to suffer? None of us does. In both wanting happiness and wanting to be free of suffering and attachment, we're all equal. Thus we can see how unbalanced our mind is in being so extreme and how much conflict we experience as a result. If we see this clearly, we'll scarcely believe how ridiculous we've been.

It's completely logical that we should feel equal with all living beings. We should approach the feeling of equality with analytical knowledge-wisdom. When we reach that point intellectually, we let our mind abide in the feeling of equality for as long as we can, maintaining single-pointed concentration on equilibrium as long as possible. When we get distracted, we return to our logical reasoning and again explain to ourselves the nature and shortcomings of attachment. When we come to the conclusion that we are equal with others, again we let our mind rest in that feeling of equilibrium. We should be satisfied with that and just stay there. That's much better than intellectualizing at that time.

When we get our first taste of equilibrium, even if it's a small one, it's an extremely powerful experience. With that small experience, our realizations have begun; we have started to realize the peaceful mind.

- All beings are equal in wanting to find happiness and be free of suffering
- We should generate a feeling of equality using logic, and then rest in that feeling
- With our first small taste of equilibrium, we've started to realize the peaceful mind

Bodhicitta

2 The seven points of cause and effect

The basis: immeasurable equanimity



To be able to see how all sentient beings have been incredibly kind to us and therefore wish to repay that kindness, we first have to logically understand that they have all helped us throughout our countless lives. We do this by seeing that all sentient beings have been our mother, not just once but countless times. Although some people may have had a difficult relationship with their mother, for most of us the mother of this life is the object of our great love and the person who has shown us the most love and kindness, more so than even our father. That's why the texts on bodhicitta usually use the mother.

When we think about how a being passes from one life to another in a continuous stream, life after life after life, we can see that because our lives have been numberless, our mothers have also been numberless. All the sentient beings in the six realms have been our mother not once but numberless times. We can't remember this because we can't remember previous lives. A child separated from its mother as a tiny baby will be unable to remember her when it grows up, but that doesn't mean it never had a mother. In the same way, we can neither remember how our current mother of this life has been our mother countless times in countless past lives, nor how all other beings have also our mother.

At present, whenever we see our current mother the intuitive feeling arises, "Oh, this is my mother." We have attained the first of the steps of the seven points of cause and effect when that same feeling arises for each and every sentient being we encounter—each insect, bird and person.

- We need to recognize that all sentient beings have been our mother countless times
- Because our lives have been numberless, our mothers have also been numberless
- When we intuitively see every being we encounter as our mother, this step is complete

Bodhicitta

2 The seven points of cause and effect

2.1 All sentient beings have been our mother



TRADITIONALLY, THE kindness of the mother is discussed using four outlines: the kindness of giving us this body, protecting us from life's dangers, leading us in the ways of the world and bearing many hardships and accumulating negative karma for us.

From the moment we were born our mother sacrificed her life to ensure that we not only survived but got everything we needed. We were totally helpless and she protected us from all the dangers around us; we relied on our mother for everything. She was also the one responsible for giving us an education, teaching us everything we had to know in order to survive in this world, how to walk, how to drink and eat, how to avoid danger, how to behave with other people and so forth, as well as seeing that we went to school and got a normal education. To do that she bore many hardships and even created negative karma. Looking at all the examples in our own life where our mother has been kind to us, our meditations on the kindness of the mother will become very effective. We have amazing opportunities because of this precious body, which our mother gave us by undergoing so many hardships and sacrifices.

In thinking about the four ways our mother has been so kind, we use our current life's mother as the template and then expand it out to all sentient beings. This mind is vital to take us to the next step, determining to repay that kindness, and from that to love, compassion and the special attitude that determines to take the sole responsibility to free them all from suffering.

- There are four outlines to guide our reflection on the kindness of the mother
- Our mother gave us our body, kept us safe, educated us and bore many hardships for us
- Using our current mother as the template, we then expand out to all sentient beings

Bodhicitta

2 The seven points of cause and effect

2.2 Remembering their kindness



IF OUR own mother were stumbling blindly toward a precipice, without a guide, and we were the only one who could help her, it would be totally shameful to not help her but simply relax in a beautiful park, singing, dancing and lying in the sun while she fell to her death.

This is the state of all sentient beings, blinded without the Dharma, stumbling with each step toward the abyss of the lower realms and unendurable suffering. They have no Dharma wisdom, no guide and are completely crazy with delusions, believing attachment to sense objects to be happiness, intoxicated by the incredible pain of the three types of suffering. Each second, each minute and each hour they stumble toward the precipice that divides this life's suffering from the far greater suffering of the next life. These sentient beings have been our mother countless times and have been incredibly kind, so if we don't do whatever we can to try to save them from that abyss we are completely shameless.

We too are suffering but we have the huge advantage that we have met the perfect guide, the virtuous teacher, and received the teachings of the Dharma that make it possible to free ourselves from suffering and attain enlightenment. We have the means to free ourselves; other sentient beings do not. If we don't do whatever we can to repay their great kindness, there is nothing more selfish, cruel and ungenerous. Seeing this, we must make the determination in the depths of our heart to repay all the mother sentient beings by liberating them from the suffering of samsara and leading them to full enlightenment.

- If our mother were stumbling toward a precipice it would be shameful not to rescue her
- All our kind mother sentient beings, crazy with delusions, are dependent on our help
- We must develop the heartfelt determination to lead them from suffering to enlightenment

Bodhicitta

2 The seven points of cause and effect

2.3 Repaying their kindness

FROM THE Buddhist point of view we know clean-clear what love is: love means wishing others to be happy. That is love. If we lose our partner and cry, that doesn't mean we feel sympathetic toward our partner and wish them well. On the contrary, we are just concerned with the fact that we are not happy. It is completely the opposite of love.

When we are in the clean-clear state, the natural state, we can see that our self-cherishing thought, our attachment, is making us cry, making us miserable, making us lonely, creating disorder in our mind. Through this experience we understand clean-clear, and by being in a clean-clear state of mind we have more loving kindness for others. We think, "I look a disaster. My self-cherishing thought and my attachment are making me cry like a baby. I am like a baby. I am hopeless. Look at me, look at my state. Really! Just like me, many other people have so much suffering, so many deluded concepts. They are not in touch with reality, not able to enter the clean-clear state." We feel sympathy; we begin to have real compassion and real love. We wish that they could abandon their confusion and abide in a happy state of mind.

We must first look at our own experience, then put this experience on others: "There are a lot of people like me." In that way lots of compassion comes and we remain in that state of loving kindness, of feeling sympathy for others. When we stay in that state it becomes meditation on bodhicitta.

- Love means wishing that others be happy
- Loving kindness is developed through seeing how we and others suffer from delusions
- Our own experience becomes the basis for developing sympathetic feelings for others

Bodhicitta

2 The seven points of cause and effect

2.4 Loving kindness

COMPASSION IS the wish that others be free from suffering. It is the source of happiness in life, the essential means of ensuring our own happiness and the happiness of others. Without compassion there is no peace or happiness in the family, in society, in the country or the world. Generating compassion is also the source of a healthy mind and a healthy body, the most powerful way to heal ourselves and other living beings.

The label “great” is added when the thought also includes the wish that we ourselves should work to free all beings from suffering and its causes. To exclude even one sentient being from our compassion means we have still not realized great compassion, nor is it great compassion if we lack the wish to free all beings ourselves. The feeling of Mahayana great compassion is just like a mother’s love for her one precious child. Were that child to fall into a pit of fire, its mother would feel such incredibly strong compassion that she would do anything to save it, including sacrifice her own life. No matter how disrespectful, rude or disobedient the child is, the mother’s love will never diminish in the slightest. Her only concern is her child’s happiness and she will do whatever she can to ensure that. This is how we should feel toward all living beings.

The more compassion we have, the more we will dedicate our life to helping others. All other living beings will then receive peace and happiness from us, either directly or indirectly. This is how each of us is responsible for the peace and happiness of each and every living being. Therefore, everything we do should be to develop compassion.

- Compassion, the wish that others be free of suffering, is the source of all happiness
- Mahayana great compassion is the wish to free every sentient being by ourselves
- Directly or indirectly, our compassion brings peace and happiness to all living beings

Bodhicitta

2 The seven points of cause and effect

2.5 Great compassion



—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

THE MIND of special attitude occurs when we actually take responsibility for the happiness of all sentient beings by ourselves alone. This is like in our daily life when we see a hard job that needs to be done and go from thinking that somebody else should do it to the decision that we should do it ourselves. Perhaps we see an old lady struggling with her bag in a railway station. Our first thought might be that somebody should certainly help her by carrying the bag, but then we think that we ourselves should do it, and with that comes the determination to do it. We take the responsibility. Rather than letting the other person suffer, we take it on ourselves.

We must free all sentient beings from all the suffering they are experiencing and place them in the peerless happiness of enlightenment. With loving kindness and great compassion, we determine we will do this; with the special attitude we take this one step further by determining we will do this by ourselves alone. It's the extra thought, voluntarily taking the full responsibility for each and every sentient being's happiness, leading them from suffering to the state of the omniscient mind. That extra phrase "by myself alone" is so important. We should always remember that.

Pabongka Dechen Nyingpo explained that the difference between the wish to repay the kindness and the special attitude is like having the intention to buy something from a shop and developing the complete determination that whatever it costs we will buy it. We move from the wish to the determination, "I'll pay for it and I'll take it!" This is the strength of the determination we have to free all beings ourselves.

- The special attitude takes sole and full responsibility for the happiness of all beings
- We should always remember the vital extra phrase "by myself alone"
- The special attitude is no longer a wish but has become a complete determination

Bodhicitta

2 The seven points of cause and effect

2.6 Special attitude



WHEN WE generate the wish to help infinite other beings and then look more deeply into what's involved in doing so, we'll see that at the moment, our mind, wisdom and actions are too limited to help all living beings and that in order to do so we'll need to develop the infinite, transcendental knowledge-wisdom of a buddha. When we become a buddha we can manifest in billions of different aspects in order to reach and communicate with all the different sentient beings in their own language according to their level of mind. So, understanding that we can't do this now but that we do have the potential to reach enlightenment and then really help them, we start to practice our spiritual path until it eventually carries us all the way to buddhahood, when we can be of true benefit to others.

The path to enlightenment has three main levels. The first leads us to upper rebirths but not out of cyclic existence; from here, the help we can give others is minimal. The second level is for those who seek complete liberation from cyclic existence mainly out of concern for their own problems. Even though such practitioners transcend their ego, the help they can give others is still quite limited; they can't help all mother sentient beings. Only fully enlightened beings can help all sentient beings—if that's what we want to do, that's the goal we have to reach, and that's where the third, or highest, level of the path leads.

This intention is bodhicitta; when the two thoughts—attaining enlightenment and others' welfare—come together simultaneously in the one mind, that's bodhicitta.

- At the moment, our mind, wisdom and actions are too limited to help all living beings
- Only when we complete the highest level of the path can we truly help others
- Bodhicitta is the mind that combines attaining enlightenment with the welfare of others

Bodhicitta

2 The seven points of cause and effect

2.7 Developing bodhicitta



THOSE WHO REALLY WANT TO REALIZE
ENLIGHTENMENT HAVE TO FORGET THEIR OWN
PLEASURE AND COMPLETELY DEVOTE THEMSELVES
TO THAT OF OTHERS —LAMA YESHE

ONE of the methods especially emphasized by Shantideva for developing bodhicitta was that of equalizing and exchanging self and others: changing attachment to one's own happiness to attachment to the happiness of others. For countless lives we have always been obsessed with our own pleasure and have completely neglected that of others. This beginningless focus on our own happiness to the exclusion of that of others is called "self-cherishing." So we have to totally change this attitude to one of greater concern for others' welfare than our own.

Actually, this thought is extremely powerful; just generating it automatically destroys the ego. For example, if somebody asks us to serve tea to a visitor, resentment immediately arises within us. We serve the tea, but unhappily. As soon as we're asked, the buzz of irritation starts in our heart. It's amazing: we can't even be happy to give somebody a cup of tea. So bodhicitta is very practical. We don't have to intellectualize too much, but just check up every day how the self-cherishing thought agitates our mind. Even if somebody asks us for a cup of tea we get irritated. That's unbelievable, but it's our ego. So we bring the person a cup of tea and begrudgingly dump it down, "Here's your tea," but even though we brought the person some tea, because we did it with selfishness buzzing in our heart, it's negative.

On the other hand, if we give somebody a cup of tea with the dedicated thought of bodhicitta, it's the most positive thing we can do: all the wonderful qualities of the omniscient enlightened mind come from concern for other beings' pleasure. Just having this understanding is very powerful.

- Equalizing and exchanging self and others is a method emphasized by Shantideva
- This thought is very powerful and practical; it automatically destroys the ego
- There is a huge difference between giving a cup of tea with selfishness or with bodhicitta

Bodhicitta

3 Exchanging self and others

IF WE can transform whatever experience we have into the path by developing the two bodhicittas we can quickly progress to ultimate happiness. The two bodhicittas are relative, all-obscuring or conventional bodhicitta, and ultimate or absolute bodhicitta. Relative bodhicitta is the primary consciousness that holds the two aspirations of wishing to benefit all beings and wishing to attain enlightenment in order to do that. Ultimate bodhicitta is the realization of emptiness within the mindstream of a being with bodhicitta.

Relative bodhicitta or all-obscuring bodhicitta—whatever translation we give it—is a bodhicitta that is true for a consciousness that still holds the ignorance of seeing things as truly existent. Just as tipping a bottle of ink over a delicate drawing made of very fine lines obliterates the drawing completely, the way things actually exist is completely obscured by this ignorant mind that sees them as truly existing—hence the term “all-obscuring.” It is still bodhicitta, and it is still an incredible, wonderful mind, but it lacks the ability to see the emptiness of the object that appears to it. Ultimate truth is that emptiness, the lack of inherent existence of self and all phenomena, and so ultimate bodhicitta is the mind that has this realization of emptiness. The traditional explanations of how to train in bodhicitta have both these two elements: the graduated training in relative bodhicitta and the training in absolute bodhicitta.

In Geshe Chekawa’s *Seven-point Mind Training*, the graduated path of ultimate bodhicitta is explained before the graduated path of relative bodhicitta. However, Lama Tsongkhapa, in common with many lamas, began with relative bodhicitta and then explained ultimate bodhicitta, emphasizing the importance of this sequence in order to skillfully lead the disciple’s mind to enlightenment.

- Transforming our experience with the two bodhicittas brings rapid progress on the path
- Ultimate bodhicitta realizes emptiness whereas relative bodhicitta does not
- Lama Tsongkhapa emphasized the importance of understanding each in sequence

Bodhicitta

3 Exchanging self and others

3.1 Training in the two types of bodhicitta



—LAMA YESHE

THE LOGICAL reason for feeling that all sentient beings are equal is that equally, all sentient beings seek happiness, and not one, ourselves included, wants to be unhappy. We should think, “All sentient beings want to be happy and no sentient being, myself included, wants to suffer. Whenever I experience an unpleasant feeling I want it to stop immediately. Although basically, all sentient beings equally desire happiness and freedom from suffering, out of the countless billions of beings, my fickle mind selects just one to make happy and forgets the others. When I encounter someone who agitates me I see them as an enemy and want to give them harm, and when an enemy finds good fortune, I get jealous.” Such a mind is unrealistic, unbalanced and extreme.

It's as if two equally hungry and thirsty people come to our door. We look at them both but choose only one, “You can come in,” and tell the other, “You can't come in. Go away.” We know that they're in exactly the same predicament, that they're both extremely hungry and thirsty, but our extreme, narrow mind picks one—“Come in, I love you. Put on some nice, clean clothes; have something to eat and drink”—and completely rejects the other.

This is the action of a narrow, silly, extreme mind. It all comes from the misconception of attachment, an unbalanced mind acting in an unrealistic manner that certainly has nothing to do with Buddhism or any other religion. Even if we check from the scientific, materialistic point of view, it's unrealistic; even ordinary, nonreligious people would easily see that this kind of mind is ridiculous.

- A mind that discriminates between self and others is unrealistic, unbalanced and extreme
- It is as illogical as helping one hungry, thirsty person and rejecting another
- Even ordinary, nonreligious people can easily see this kind of mind is ridiculous

*Bodhicitta**3 Exchanging self and others**3.2 Training the mind in relative bodhicitta**3.2.1 We and all others are equal*



IT MIGHT seem that our life would be perfect if it weren't for all the external factors that keep interfering and bringing us suffering, but when we look deeper we will see that if we could destroy the self-cherishing thought, we wouldn't suffer at all, no matter what situation arose. This is where the blame lies for every tiny bit of suffering we have ever had to experience.

The self-cherishing thought is like a butcher who slaughters our freedom, bringing us problems in this life and beyond. It makes enemies, prevents us from creating virtue by following the Dharma, and causes anger and other negative emotions to rule us. Rather than leading us to peace and enlightenment, it leads us instead to the lower realms. It's like a thief, stealing away any hard-earned merit we have accumulated—and yet we still want to follow it. This selfish attitude is what has caused us to be endlessly reborn in the six realms of samsara, experiencing all of the various sufferings an infinite number of times. While we reside in the human realm, it is the cause of old age, sickness and death and all the other types of suffering we face every day.

As long as we hold self-cherishing in our heart, enlightenment, liberation and bodhicitta are all impossible. Attaining any of the lamrim realizations such as the perfect human rebirth or the realization of impermanence and death is impossible. Not one single action in our day, from morning until night, can become Dharma and hence the cause of happiness. The self-cherishing thought fills our mind, giving us no space to think of others or to develop compassion and loving kindness.

- Every tiny bit of suffering we have ever experienced is due to the self-cherishing attitude
- Self-cherishing is a butcher that slaughters our freedom and leads us to the lower realms
- As long as we harbor self-cherishing we will never gain any lamrim realizations

Bodhicitta

3 Exchanging self and others

3.2 Training the mind in relative bodhicitta

3.2.2 The faults of self-cherishing

OUR SELF-CHERISHING thought is the root of all human problems. It makes our lives difficult and miserable. The solution to self-cherishing, its antidote, is the mind that is its complete opposite—bodhicitta. The self-cherishing mind is worried about only me, me—the self-existent I. Bodhicitta substitutes others for self. It creates space in our mind. Then even if our dearest friend forgets to give us a Christmas present, we don't mind.

In his text *Lama Chöpa*, the Panchen Lama says, “Self-cherishing is the cause of all misery and dissatisfaction, and holding all mother sentient beings dearer than oneself is the foundation of all realizations and knowledge. Therefore bless me to change self-cherishing into concern for all others.” This is not some deep philosophical theory but a very simple statement. Without needing a Tibetan text to tell us, we know from our own life's experiences that our self-cherishing thought is the cause of all our confusion and frustration. This evolution of suffering is found not only in Tibetan culture but in ours as well.

The Panchen Lama goes on to say that we should look at what the Buddha did. He gave up his self-attachment and attained all the sublime realizations. But look at us—we are obsessed with “me, me, me” and have realized nothing but unending misery. This is very clear isn't it? Therefore, we should know clean-clear how this works. Get rid of the false concept of self-cherishing and we'll be free of all misery and dissatisfaction. Concern ourselves with the welfare of all others and wish for them to attain the highest realizations such as bodhicitta and we'll find all happiness and satisfaction.

- The self-cherishing mind is the root of all human problems and bodhicitta is its antidote
- Our life experiences show how self-cherishing causes all our confusion and frustration
- In contrast, the Buddha gave up self-attachment and attained all the sublime realizations

Bodhicitta

3 Exchanging self and others

3.2 Training the mind in relative bodhicitta

3.2.2 The faults of self-cherishing

EVERY HAPPINESS and benefit we have ever experienced has come from others. When we were born, we came from our mother's womb with nothing. We didn't even have any clothes. Our parents gave us clothes, milk, care and attention.

Now that we have grown we have clothes and many other things. Where did they come from? They came from the effort of other sentient beings. Maybe we think it's because we have money. We can't wear money. If other people hadn't made the fabric we wouldn't have any clothes. The cake we enjoy is also the result of others' effort. If they hadn't put effort into making the cake we wouldn't have any. It's the same with all our other samsaric enjoyments; everything comes from other sentient beings, from other people's giving it to us. Think of everything we've done today. The milk we had this morning—it wasn't our own, was it? Similarly, we can check in detail everything we have. It has all come from others. We were born with nothing. Other people are so kind. Don't think that we've come up through society—studying, working, making money—and now we're doing everything ourselves.

Forgetting the kindness of others and thinking "I did it" is a completely mistaken, totally unrealistic mental attitude. Check up. All the food in the supermarket comes from other sentient beings' effort. We can't do everything ourselves. Other mother sentient beings expended their own energy, brought the food to the supermarket and made it available to us. I'm sure that our ego and attachment have never let us think that other sentient beings are kind. Over the eons that thought has never even crossed our mind.

- Every happiness and benefit we have ever experienced has come from others
- When we check up we'll see it's impossible to live without the kindness of others
- To forget the kindness of others is a mistaken and unrealistic mental attitude

Bodhicitta

3 Exchanging self and others

3.2 Training the mind in relative bodhicitta

3.2.3 The benefits of cherishing others

WIOTHOUT THE existence of suffering sentient beings there is no way we can actualize bodhicitta. Therefore, every single living being is unbelievably precious and can benefit us so much. Living beings are our real teacher. Cherishing and serving even one living being—whether our mother, father, child or even our enemy—leads us to enlightenment because it purifies so many obscurations and accumulates so much merit.

Even one living being is more precious than we are because all our happiness and success comes from cherishing this one living being. Since that is so, it follows that two living beings are even more precious and important, so we should also cherish and serve them. A hundred living beings are much more precious and important than we are, so we should cherish and work for them as well. Now, living beings are numberless, so the numberless living beings are unbelievably precious and important and, because of this, we should cherish them. Analyzing it in this way, we can see that there is nothing more important in our life than to cherish and work for the numberless other living beings.

If there is one sentient being in our life that we don't cherish, such as a person who dislikes or criticizes us, there can be no enlightenment. Without cherishing this person, we cannot achieve enlightenment; if we do cherish this one person, we can achieve enlightenment. Therefore, this person is the most precious one in our life. We can cease all the defilements of our mind, liberate ourselves from all suffering, achieve peerless happiness with all the realizations and then enlighten the numberless other sentient beings because of the kindness of this one precious person.

- Cherishing even one living being will purify our obscurations and accumulate merit
- There is nothing more important than cherishing the numberless living beings
- Each person is so precious because through cherishing them we find peerless happiness

*Bodhicitta**3 Exchanging self and others**3.2 Training the mind in relative bodhicitta**3.2.3 The benefits of cherishing others*



BRAVELY CHANGING attachment to oneself into concern for others is both wonderful and wise. There are countless living beings on earth but very few know about exchanging self and others. This practice may be very difficult but it's extremely worthwhile. If we can do it, it will help solve all our problems. Changing our outlook in this way transforms whatever misery we perceive into the peaceful path of liberation. We desperately need a method such as this. Life is suffering; our minds are weak. Exchanging self and others is truly revolutionary.

If you have difficulty taking the suffering of others onto yourself, first practice on yourself. The next time your knees hurt when you're sitting in meditation, take that pain onto your ego and let it freak out. Let your ego freak out more and more. Practice that for a week. Then practice taking onto yourself all the suffering you have ever experienced in your life. Your ego and attachment won't like that either, but let them freak out again. Then slowly, slowly extend your practice to take upon yourself the sufferings of your parents, your friends, all the people in your country and all the people on earth until you are receiving the problems and suffering of all sentient beings throughout the universe.

The nature of attachment is such that when problems arise, it blindly pushes them away. This practice trains our mind to handle negativity, feel compassion for the others and take their suffering and problems onto ourselves, which in turn helps us overcome self-cherishing and cherish others more than ourselves.

- Exchanging self and others is the inner revolution that will help solve all our problems
- We start by taking on our own suffering, then gradually take on the suffering of others
- This trains our mind to handle negativity and to cherish others more than ourselves

Bodhicitta

3 Exchanging self and others

3.2 Training the mind in relative bodhicitta

3.2.4 How to meditate on taking and giving (tonglen)

TIBETAN LAMAS have a special mind training technique for releasing attachment and the self-cherishing thought where we transform our body into thousands, millions and billions of bodies and give them to all sentient beings. We transform our body into beautiful things—not horrible ugly things that we don't want—and give them to all sentient beings. We do this because at the moment we cling to our body with tremendously powerful attachment energy; giving it away to others begins to break that down.

Not only do we give our body to others—we now meditate on giving them all our possessions. Our house transforms into thousands of houses, the food in our refrigerator multiplies thousands of times, and so forth with all our other enjoyments. We send all this out to all sentient beings with much compassion, realizing that all beings are equal in wanting happiness and not desiring suffering, but always act out of ignorance and therefore have to constantly experience suffering, confusion and dissatisfaction.

This kind of meditation is not a joke or something funny. It's very useful. Prior to practicing it our attachment might make us feel unhappy when giving somebody even one cent, but through training our mind we can slowly, slowly reach the point where we give things away with much joy and pleasure. This is experience—I'm not saying it's my experience but there are many people whose it is, in both the East and the West. So it's something we too need to gain—the ability to happily give away our body and all our material possessions.

- To undermine attachment, we transform our body into beautiful gifts for others
- We can also meditate on multiplying our possessions and sending them to all beings
- This is a gradual training in how to give things away with great joy and pleasure

Bodhicitta

3 Exchanging self and others

3.2 Training the mind in relative bodhicitta

3.2.4 How to meditate on taking and giving (tonglen)

WHAT IS the technique for actually practicing the taking and giving meditation, which Tibetans call *tonglen*? Start by breathing out through your right nostril. Visualize the air you exhale in the form of white light, the essence of which is all your positive energy and wisdom. This white light radiates to all sentient beings in the six realms of samsara and beyond. It enters their left nostril, goes into their hearts and generates in them great bliss. Visualize the air they exhale in the form of thick black smoke, the essence of which is all their negativity, confusion and heavy suffering. This dark, polluted energy enters your left nostril and goes down into your heart. Don't leave it outside of you; bring it right down into your heart so that your ego and attachment completely freak out.

Do the above cycle of breathing white light out through your right nostril and black smoke in through your left three times. Then breathe out through your left nostril and in through your right three times. Then breathe out and in through both nostrils together three times. At the end of each nine rounds concentrate for as long as you can that you and all other sentient beings have been completely purified of all suffering, negativity and dualistic mind and are fully enlightened, experiencing everlasting bliss that pervades your entire body and mind. When you lose focus on this, repeat the nine rounds once more.

We shouldn't think that this is just a fantasy and that doing this meditation makes no difference to the suffering of ourselves and others. Actually, it is a profound practice, and each time we do it, it brings us and all other sentient beings closer to enlightenment.

- The technique of *tonglen* involves breathing out positivity and breathing in negativity
- After each cycle of nine rounds, focus strongly on purification and bliss
- Each time we do this practice it brings all beings and ourselves closer to enlightenment

Bodhicitta

3 Exchanging self and others

3.2 Training the mind in relative bodhicitta

*3.2.4 How to meditate on taking and giving (*tonglen*)*



THE MAHAYANA technique called *lojong*—thought transformation, or mind training—is essentially about transforming any situation into one conducive to the path. We view every situation as positive, using whatever we meet as a means to develop our mind in wisdom and compassion. There is no such thing as a “bad” situation other than what is labeled by our mind. We can just as easily label it “good.”

The fundamental Buddhist practice is to not harm others, yet by becoming angry, attached, jealous and so forth, we harm ourselves and others. Thought transformation is an incredibly skillful way of reversing this, where everything we do benefits ourselves and others. This practice becomes much easier when we see that following the self-cherishing thought harms us and going against it helps us. For instance, when somebody gets angry at us, our habitual reaction is to get angry in return. But by applying thought transformation techniques we can come to see them as our best friend, appreciating how we need their anger to overcome our impatience and thereby complete the perfection of patience, a requisite for attaining enlightenment. We then see them as a precious jewel, a wonderful teacher. That doesn’t mean that their actions against us are necessarily good, just that our reaction to them can be beneficial or not, depending on how we interpret them.

Overturning our habitual selfish traits and training our mind in working for others is the core of thought transformation practice. Without such a radical transformation we cannot hope to develop great compassion, bodhicitta and all the other minds that lead to enlightenment.

- Mind training can transform everything we encounter into a step on the path
- It gives us techniques to see anybody who provokes us as a precious jewel or teacher
- Lojong overturns our habitual selfish traits and trains our mind in working for others

Bodhicitta

4 Converting unfortunate circumstances into the path

THE BUDDHIST approach to negativity is not to avoid it but to confront it head-on and check why it's there, what its reality is and so forth. We think that this is the best foundation for destroying the negative mind and is much more logical and scientific than just avoiding it—like running away to some other place or trying to think only positive things. That's not enough. So, when problems arise, instead of turning away we stare them right in the face. That's very useful; that's the Buddhist way.

If we run from problems we can never really ascertain their root. Putting our head in the sand doesn't help. We have to determine where the problem comes from and how it arises. The way to discover the clean-clear mind is to understand the nature of the unclear mind, especially its cause. If there's a thorn bush growing at our door, scratching us every time we go in or out, pruning it won't be enough to solve the problem once and for all—we have to pull it out by the root. Then it will never bother us again.

Through meditation we can discover how the selfish mind of attachment is the cause of all mental disease and frustration and how changing our attitude can make our mind healthy and give purpose and meaning to our life. The attitude we need to change is that of excessive worry and self-concern—"Maybe I'm going to get sick, maybe this, maybe that"—to one where through mind training we totally dedicate our life to the benefit of others.

- We shouldn't turn away from problems but instead stare them right in the face
- We can discover the clean-clear mind by understanding the nature of the unclear mind
- By changing our attitude we make our mind healthy and find meaning in life

ONE OF the most important things that Mahayana thought training teaches is putting all the blame on the self-cherishing thought, where it belongs. In this way we develop aversion to the self-cherishing thought and come to see it as our enemy. Thus, instead of identifying with and obeying the self-cherishing thought, we separate ourselves from it. Then all our daily activities become pure Dharma practice.

No matter what difficult circumstances arise, we should put all the blame on the self-cherishing thought. We must recollect how every difficulty is due to the shortcomings of self-cherishing. Then, on top of that, we give back to the self-cherishing thought all the problems and undesirable things that the self-cherishing thought has given us. The self-cherishing mind wants us to look elsewhere for the source of our problems, but with this practice we lay the blame squarely on the root cause: self-cherishing itself. Without this understanding, our problems cause us to create negative karma, but by using our problems as weapons to destroy self-cherishing, whatever problem we are experiencing becomes a means to eliminate ignorance and negative karma. This is especially useful if the problem is unavoidable. By sending problems back to the self-cherishing thought and destroying it, our experience of problems really becomes Dharma practice.

Whatever energy we would have used to eliminate an external problem can now be used to eliminate our self-cherishing instead. It is especially effective to use our fears about being judged or criticized to destroy self-cherishing. If we can do this continually, then fears, worries and paranoia cannot arise. This is the deep, essential psychology that really wipes out the self-cherishing thought, the source of all our problems, and makes it non-existent.

- One of the key Mahayana trainings is to put all the blame on the self-cherishing thought
- In this way our problems become weapons to eliminate ignorance and negative karma
- This is the deep essential psychology that will destroy the self-cherishing thought

Bodhicitta

4 Converting unfortunate circumstances into the path

4.1 Converting circumstances through thought

4.1.1 Converting them through analysis



IF WE'RE not tested, we take teaching after teaching and think we're OK, but when we're confronted with a difficult situation, it's possible that we'll find we're not OK at all. So that's why true Dharma practitioners welcome trouble. It gives us a chance to see if what we've been studying works or not, a chance to transform suffering into happiness. Otherwise we just go blithely along, completely out of touch with reality, thinking we're OK when we're not, because we haven't actually been practicing Dharma at all.

When I was studying at Sera in Tibet from the ages of nine to twenty-four, I tried my best to study and practice Dharma. But still, in 1959, the Chinese kicked us out. Well, not exactly, but they did not allow people to practice Dharma, so I thought that if I want to keep practicing there was no reason to stay in Tibet. So I escaped to India. In that painful situation of uncertainty I had to look deeply into myself to see if all those teachings I had taken would allow me to cope with my new reality. I found that they helped a great deal, and that gave me the confidence I needed to deal with the changing environment in which we found ourselves.

The painful experience helps us develop a deeper understanding that is beyond the merely intellectual. Of course, if we're completely ignorant, it doesn't matter how much suffering we experience, there's no way for that to lead to happiness. All we do is go from misery to more misery. If, on the other hand, we have at least a modicum of Dharma wisdom, when we're in difficulty we know how to use that experience to lead ourselves into happiness.

- True Dharma practitioners welcome trouble because it tests us and keeps us real
- In painful situations, as when the Tibetans fled into exile, the teachings help enormously
- Difficult experiences help us develop a deeper understanding beyond the intellectual

Bodhicitta

4 Converting unfortunate circumstances into the path

4.1 Converting circumstances through thought

4.1.1 Converting them through analysis



WHENEVER WE experience problems, we can use them to eliminate pride, one of the six principal delusions. Until we completely liberate ourselves from delusion, we have no real freedom and are continually affected by past karma and disturbing thoughts. Pride seems to be our friend but in reality it only brings us endless problems.

Pride focuses on the shortcomings of others and exaggerates our own good qualities. When we realize that we ourselves have many problems and recollect them, pride does not arise. Recognizing our own suffering eliminates pride and causes compassion to arise toward others who, like us, are suffering in samsara. Pride makes us rejoice when others have problems, which prevents compassion from arising. If, instead, we recollect our own problems, the virtuous mind of wanting others to be happy will easily arise.

One way to control pride is to contemplate our own mistakes. Thinking of our successes causes pride to arise, but when we look at our own mistakes, our pride disappears. We should consider how little we know: consider whatever worldly knowledge we possess and how little it has helped us attain ultimate happiness; consider whatever small knowledge of the Dharma we possess and recognize how much more Dharma we have to learn. There are subjects we may feel we know, but while we may know the words, we do not have the realizations. Although we may understand the explanations, if we are still suffering because of problems, we clearly do not understand the true nature of our mind, our body and our senses. Thinking in this way helps to stop pride.

- Problems can help us eliminate pride, the source of endless difficulties
- Acknowledging our problems destroys pride and allows compassion to arise
- Contemplating our mistakes and lack of knowledge can also stop pride

Bodhicitta

4 Converting unfortunate circumstances into the path

4.1 Converting circumstances through thought

4.1.1 Converting them through analysis

WITH RESPECT to human problems, most are intellectually generated. Of course, there are problems at the deeper, intuitive level, but most problems, such as emotional disturbances and anxiety, come from the way we think.

When we were babies, we didn't have political problems, did we? When we were babies, we didn't have economic or societal problems. That's because we were too immature for ego conflict or intellectualization. When we were babies we didn't have religious conflict, religious dissatisfaction or philosophical or racial conflict; we didn't have those kinds of intellectual problem. But as we grow, we begin to intellectualize: "What is society? Who am I? How should I identify myself? What is my significant archetype?" Our ego wants some kind of identity, something to hold on to in a grasping way. It can't be natural. That's why we're completely artificial, confused and dissatisfied.

We can see in the modern world most human problems come from conflicted relationships between people. Men have trouble with women; women have trouble with men. All this comes from intellectual games, not intuition. Our intellectual concepts fabricate beliefs such as, "This object is the best for me to grasp at. If I can't have it I'll kill myself. Other things are not reality for me; this object is my only reality." In this way we fix our intellectual concepts and finish up committing suicide. So we can see how human intellectual problems are unnatural, unrealistic and completely divorced from reality. For example, our deluded mind describes an apple as "Fantastic. It has a beautiful red color, I love it so much." That's the exaggerated way we describe anything we're attached to and why we finish up with a sick mind. Fundamentally, it's all fantasy.

- Most problems, such as emotional upset and anxiety, come from the way we think
- As we grow up, our ego creates our problems by intellectualizing and grasping
- Human problems are the unnatural and unrealistic consequence of a sick mind

Bodhicitta

4 Converting unfortunate circumstances into the path

4.1 Converting circumstances through thought

4.1.2 Converting them through the view



THE IMPORTANT thing to understand is that the self-pity image of ourselves to which we cling does not exist. I could easily explain this in a detailed, philosophical way but the simple approach is to look at how we hold ourselves today, “I am that-this,” and compare that with how we held ourselves last year.

First of all, things are constantly changing in the shortest fraction of a second. There’s no way that the Mr. Jones of today can be exactly the same as the Mr. Jones of yesterday. It’s just not possible. And when we clearly see the way in which we hold a permanent self-image, all we can do is laugh at ourselves. It’s just so nonsensical. We believe that we’re the same person we were ten years ago. That’s what Lord Buddha meant when he said that we’re deluded, deluded, deluded! Deluded means holding and hanging on to nonsensical conceptions and hallucinated projections of ourselves, and as long as we don’t eradicate this cause of all problems, we’re not doing a good job.

We can meditate for twenty or thirty years but if we don’t touch the root of problems, if we don’t shake our ego, if all we do is make it more beautiful and solid, we’re not doing a good job at all. What we need to do is to shake our samsara, the root of ego, the way our ego conception holds things. When we shake the Mt. Meru of our ego, our entire samsaric mandala collapses. That’s a real earthquake. Lord Buddha’s teaching on universal reality is so profound. It shows us the best way to be healthy by shattering all our concepts and illusions.

- It’s vital to understand how we cling to a non-existent self-pity image of ourselves
- Believing that we are the same person today as we were yesterday is nonsensical
- Our samsaric mandala will collapse when we shatter the concepts and illusions of ego

Bodhicitta

4 Converting unfortunate circumstances into the path

4.1 Converting circumstances through thought

4.1.2 Converting them through the view



WHEN WE fall ill, instead of getting depressed and obsessed with our illness, which only creates more problems, we should immediately think, “I have prayed to take on the problems of others and I have now received them. I will experience this illness on behalf of all living beings.” Our illness is the illness of all living beings and since we have to experience it, we might as well use it to develop the ultimate good heart of bodhicitta.

How do we do this? We need to be aware of all the illnesses and all the other sufferings experienced by other living beings. We then experience our disease on behalf of all the other people with the same disease, on behalf of all people with diseases of any kind and on behalf of all the numberless other living beings with problems. We are experiencing it so that others can be free from all suffering and its causes and enjoy the peerless happiness of full enlightenment. Whether or not our illness is serious, we can use it to benefit others in this way.

If we were healthy it would be so much harder not to focus on our own happiness, but here we have been handed this priceless jewel. As I often say, our main goal in life is not to be healthy or to have a long life, it’s to benefit other sentient beings. Whether we are healthy or unhealthy, rich or poor, praised or blamed, living or dying, our main aim is only to benefit others. If being healthy doesn’t help us achieve this, it’s useless; if being sick does, then it’s very worthwhile. Happiness in life depends on having this attitude.

- When we fall ill, we can use our illness to develop the ultimate good heart of bodhicitta
- We accomplish this by making prayers to experience our disease on behalf of others
- Our main goal in life isn’t to be healthy or have a long life but to benefit other beings

Bodhicitta

4 Converting unfortunate circumstances into the path

4.2 Converting circumstances through action

ONE OF the most effective tools to free ourselves completely from the self-cherishing thought is the five powers. This is the fundamental practice that makes life most meaningful and beneficial for all sentient beings and prevents us from creating obstacles on the path. It is the foundation that underlies all the other practices we do—sadhanas, mantras, prostrations and so forth. This is what destroys our self-cherishing and stabilizes our guru devotion, buoying us during our life and preparing us for death.

The mind training texts describe two different orders to the five powers, one to do in life and one to do at the time of death. The order in life is: *the power of motivation; the power of acquaintance; the power of the white seed; the power of destruction* (of self-cherishing) and *the power of prayer*. During our lifetime we constantly check our motivation to ensure it is as vast and positive as possible. After generating this motivation in the morning, we do all our daily activities—walking, eating, working and so forth—for others, as purely as possible. By practicing loving kindness, compassion, patience and morality in relation to others, we accumulate merit. When a problem occurs, we immediately remember that it has been caused by our own selfishness and heap all the blame on it. Finally, the power of prayer involves dedicating the merits from our positive actions to develop bodhicitta.

Whether we experience fortune or problems, success or failure, health or illness, by practicing these five powers, which are the essence of the whole Dharma, we use every experience to develop bodhicitta. In this way, our mind will always be happy.

- The five powers are a fundamental Buddhist practice for making life meaningful
- They are the powers of *motivation, acquaintance, the white seed, destruction* and *prayer*
- By practicing these five powers we can use every experience in life to develop bodhicitta

Bodhicitta

4 Converting unfortunate circumstances into the path

4.2 Converting circumstances through action

GENERATING A brave, determined attitude is extremely important for our thought transformation practice to succeed. With this strong motivation, we proceed to train our mind until we become like an experienced horseman—even though their mind may be distracted, they are able to manage the horse effortlessly, no matter what it does, without falling off or endangering their life. They are able to cope because their body responds naturally to the way the horse runs. Similarly, when meeting miserable conditions or obstacles, an experienced thought transformation practitioner immediately and effortlessly recognizes them as good.

When we meet undesirable conditions, if we spontaneously recognize them as good, we will be happy. During times of criticism, poverty, difficulties, failure, sickness or even imminent death, nothing will disturb our mind. We will be consistently happy. Effortlessly, naturally, we will recognize the benefits of problems, and the more we see the benefits, the happier we will be to experience difficulties in our life. By training our mind and becoming accustomed to not seeing problems as problems, even great problems of the mind and body become so easy to bear that we experience no difficulty when we encounter them. Problems become enjoyable, as light and soft as cotton.

It is not enough for me say these things; this has to come from our own experience. Of course, we cannot suddenly face big problems and transform them into the Buddhist path. As much as we are able, we train our mind to transform small sufferings; then, when we experience big problems or great disasters—even death, the most fearful thing of all—we will be able to infuse them with virtue and use them in our Dharma practice to move further along the path to ultimate happiness.

- Transforming problems can be as effortless as an experienced rider managing a horse
- When we spontaneously see the good in problems, nothing can disturb our mind
- Through gradual training, even great disasters can be used in our Dharma practice

Bodhicitta

4 Converting unfortunate circumstances into the path

4.2 Converting circumstances through action

WHEREVER WE go—East, West, sky, earth, beneath the earth—there are other sentient beings. If, through having recognized the false conceptions of ego and attachment, we develop pure motivation and dedicate our life to others, our life will become truly worthwhile. We will give real meaning to being alive and our relationships with those around us will be much better. We don't have to change anything external; the only change we have to make is within our mind.

As long as we direct our energy into the channel of peace and wisdom it will spontaneously flow that way. We don't need to think too much. We should just act in the right way and do our best to gain realizations; that's enough. We always evaluate actions by their appearance: "They did this; that's bad. They did that; that's good." We think that actions are fixed as good or bad. There's no such thing as an action that's always good or bad; actions can't be categorized in that way. It all depends on the mind. For example, if we do things that are normally considered religious with attachment, they're negative. Outside observers will think that we're doing something good but they'll be wrong. The actual way to judge whether an action is good or bad is by the motivation behind it, not the action itself.

We must recognize that our real enemy, the thief who steals our happiness, is the inner thief, the one inside our mind—the one we have cherished since beginningless time. Therefore, we should make the strong determination to throw it out and never let it back in.

- Life becomes truly worthwhile when we abandon ego and dedicate ourselves to others
- It's the motivation behind our actions that counts, not their external appearance
- Our real enemy is the self-cherishing thought in our mind, which steals our happiness

Bodhicitta

4 Converting unfortunate circumstances into the path

4.2 Converting circumstances through action



LET'S BE practical. Most of us are workers and have a job to deal with, so when we get up each morning we should make the strong dedication, "Today I will try as much as possible to dedicate my life for others. Physically and mentally, I will do whatever I can to make my life beneficial for others." Make this strong motivation and think, "When circumstances bring problems and people criticize me, I will not become angry."

With this strong motivation, even if we work as a garbage collector, picking up garbage and putting it in a truck, that is still OK. We are doing something for other people. The most important thing is our motivation. Generating the right motivation is very important, especially in Western society. Westerners were not made to be great meditators, not made to have single-pointed concentration. Do you understand? We were not made for that, but we can dedicate our lives to others, to serve others, to do something meaningful for others. And we can really practice this daily.

I feel this is a more effective way of living life than just saying, "Oh, I have to be a great meditator." Our society is not made for that kind of thing. But practically, we can dedicate ourselves to others. We can control our anger, control our selfishness and control our attachment. We can just be open and serve others as much as possible. This we can do.

- Every morning we should make a strong motivation to dedicate our life for others
- With this strong motivation, even a garbage collector's life becomes meaningful
- Controlling delusions and serving others is the most practical path in the modern world

Bodhicitta

4 Converting unfortunate circumstances into the path

4.2 Converting circumstances through action



THE MAHAYANA way of bringing the mind to enlightenment is gradual. As we have seen, in order to develop universal love, we first have to develop equilibrium. On this basis, we generate the bodhisattva's mind of enlightenment, bodhicitta, and having done so, our duty is to actualize the six perfections of charity, morality, patience, effort, concentration and wisdom.

The bodhisattva's practice of charity or, in fact, any of the six perfections, has to include the other five. In other words, charity must be practiced together with morality, patience, effort, concentration and wisdom—especially the latter. We need to have a profound understanding of emptiness in what we call the circle of the three: the emptiness of the object we are giving, the action of giving and the recipient of our gift. If we give without such understanding, it is neither beneficial nor perfect and, furthermore, can bring a conflicted reaction. If we really, deeply check up what true charity is, we'll probably find that in our whole life we've never performed even one act of charity. Have we really checked the recipient's needs? Have we generated the right motivation before giving? Have we performed the action with meditation on the circle of the three?

I'm sure that if we practice properly, we can definitely attain everlasting, peaceful enlightenment. But even forgetting about that, if we practice well today, tomorrow we'll automatically be more peaceful; if we meditate properly in the morning, our whole day goes more smoothly. We can easily experience the truth of this. Attaining enlightenment through meditating, practicing the six perfections and advancing through the ten bodhisattva stages is a gradual process.

- Having developed the mind of bodhicitta, our next step is to actualize the six perfections
- The practice of each perfection must include all the others, especially wisdom
- If we practice properly we can definitely attain everlasting peaceful enlightenment

Bodhicitta

5 Training in the activities of a bodhisattva

5.1 The six perfections

ALL RELIGIONS emphasize the importance of charity, but Lord Buddha's approach differs from most in that he explained mainly the psychological aspect of giving and was not so interested in the externals of it. Why? Because the perfection of giving is realized only when we completely release the mind of miserly attachment, and this is a purely mental thing.

If our giving weakens our disturbing negative attitudes and brings more peace and understanding into our mind, it's religious, but if it serves merely to increase our delusions, we're better off not doing it, no matter how it appears from the outside. Why do something that exacerbates our already agitated mind? For example, if we're not free of attachment, we might give something to somebody today and tomorrow be thinking, "I wish I hadn't given him that; now I need it." This kind of giving has nothing whatsoever to do with religion. Also, we should not make charity of things that belong to other people, like our family and friends. I've often been asked if it's OK to steal from the rich to give to the poor. That's not charity. Another thing is that sometimes we're extreme. We don't check to see if the recipient needs what we're giving; we just give without hesitation. However, sometimes it may not be beneficial; in such cases, it's better not to give. If what we give creates problems and, instead of being helped, the recipient experiences harm, it's not charity. We think our action is positive, but it's negative.

There are three kinds of charity: giving material objects, giving knowledge-wisdom and saving others from danger. We should do whichever of these we can, with as much understanding as possible, according to our ability.

- The Buddha emphasized the psychological rather than the external aspect of generosity
- Genuine giving decreases our delusions and is done with a mind free from attachment
- We should carry out the three kinds of charity as often and as best as we can

Bodhicitta

5 Training in the activities of a bodhisattva

5.1 The six perfections

5.1.1 Charity

IN *LAMRIM CHENMO*, Lama Tsongkhapa explained the three types of morality: restraining ourselves from doing nonvirtuous actions, ripening our mind and working for other sentient beings. The first type is mainly explained as developing the ten virtuous actions, which are the opposite of the ten nonvirtues. The second refers to developing whatever virtues don't already exist in our mind. The third, working for the welfare of others, means more than just helping them with their mundane needs and includes guiding people with no idea of Dharma so they can come to know and follow it.

The purpose of observing morality is to stop all the hindrances on the path and to achieve enlightenment. Living a moral life helps us achieve these long-term goals and also brings immediate benefit; we naturally lessen any hindrances to a happy life by keeping our vows and not harming others. It's as if living in morality is the ground from which all other positive actions can arise. There is a huge difference between somebody who is living in morality and somebody who is not. A person who does not have the ground of morality will never be able to grow the seed of everlasting happiness and will not only suffer continually but will also be unable to avoid harming others. It's that simple.

The key to observing morality is the various vows we can take such as the five lay vows, the eight Mahayana precepts, one of the sets of ordination vows or the bodhisattva vows, which we will look at later. It is extremely rare to be able to take these vows, but even rarer to be able to keep them.

- The three types of morality are *avoiding nonvirtue, ripening the mind and working for others*
- Living in morality is the ground from which all other positive actions can arise
- The key to observing morality is the various sets of vows that we can take

Bodhicitta

5 Training in the activities of a bodhisattva

5.1 The six perfections

5.1.2 Morality

HAPPINESS and peace of mind in everyday life depend on how much we are able to practice the three types of patience. Therefore, it is very important to not only understand precisely what they are but to also put them into practice.

The first type of patience is the patience of not retaliating when faced with harm. When we transform our mind into patience we feel no hatred or wish to retaliate when somebody tries to harm us through criticism, abuse, physical harm, theft or other means. We learn to appreciate the kindness of this person by seeing that what they are harming is our self-cherishing thought, our ego, which has kept us suffering for countless eons. The second type, bearing hardships with patience, is especially important for somebody practicing Dharma. We can't expect to do a retreat, for example, without facing problems. We can all see that when we are too concerned with comfort and easily irritated by small harms, they become distractions. The third type is the patience of gaining certainty about the Dharma, which we achieve by meditating on and understanding the meaning of the lamrim and the extraordinary qualities of the Three Rare Sublime Ones. When we have all these qualities, we will never lack the patience to persevere with our Dharma practice.

Even one person practicing patience means that numberless sentient beings—however many there are on earth—receive less harm. The greater the number of people living in patience, the more harmony and less anger and harm there will be. Therefore, the peace of this planet depends on our practicing patience. Peace does not depend on somebody else securing it for us; it is entirely our own responsibility.

- Happiness and peace in daily life depend on our understanding and practice of patience
- The three types are: *not retaliating, bearing hardships and gaining certainty about the Dharma*
- The peace of this planet is entirely our responsibility; it depends on our practicing patience

Bodhicitta

5 Training in the activities of a bodhisattva

5.1 The six perfections

5.1.3 Patience

PERSEVERANCE IS the mind of enthusiasm, or energy, that rejoices in virtue, and like the other perfections is a vital quality for us to develop. With this mind we can put effort into removing the delusions, the obstacles that block our mind from attaining perfect concentration. Without perseverance, even if we try to concentrate we are trapped in the disturbed mind, distracted by either sinking or scattering thoughts, like being caught between the fangs of a vicious animal.

When we have the perseverance to practice Dharma, our life, whether long or short, becomes highly meaningful. How quickly we attain enlightenment depends on how much perseverance we have. This is the quality that separates us from the distractions of worldly affairs, laziness and sleep. Unless we develop perseverance we will find it very difficult not to succumb to laziness, thereby falling into nonvirtue and losing all the merit we have accumulated. When this happens, we won't be able to achieve even worldly success, let alone fulfill our ultimate purpose. There are three types of laziness to overcome: the laziness of procrastination, putting self-cherishing above practicing the Dharma, the laziness of being attached to worldly affairs and the laziness of discouragement and low self-worth.

When we attain the perfection of perseverance, as a bodhisattva we will be able to work tirelessly for others and never lose hope. We will not become discouraged and will serve others with great joy. For the sake of every single sentient being, we will be able to work without discouragement or exhaustion, even enduring the suffering of the lowest of the hot hells for an ocean of eons if we need to. We must have this kind of resolve.

- Perseverance is the mind that rejoices in virtue with enthusiasm and great energy
- It overcomes the three types of laziness: *procrastination, attachment* and *discouragement*
- The perfection of perseverance enables us to work tirelessly for others with great joy

Bodhicitta

5 Training in the activities of a bodhisattva

5.1 The six perfections

5.1.4 Perseverance

WHY DOES Buddhism put so much emphasis on meditation? It's because our mind is so gross and our memory so poor that we forget things easily and cannot recall our countless lives' experiences. The purpose of meditation, therefore, is to increase, or develop, our memory, or mindfulness, of reality.

Our distracted, fragmented thoughts, which we experience continuously every day, are countless. Nonsense repeatedly cycles through our mind, again, again, again, again. . . . It's like in the pictures of the Wheel of Life, whose hub shows a pig, a chicken and a snake going round and round endlessly. Like that, our pig, chicken and snake mentalities continuously reverberate in our consciousness, reducing our memory to almost nothing. The meditation techniques that stop these three mentalities are very important. Without stopping these deluded minds we can't see the concepts of ego that we spontaneously experience in everyday life. They're very subtle, so without eliminating these gross minds it's impossible to see our ego's activity. That's why we meditate on the energy of our own conscious experience.

Some people think that first we have to study emptiness in order to understand it and then we meditate. That's wrong. To realize emptiness, first we have to meditate. The thing is that the gross symptoms of ego, the three poisonous mentalities I just mentioned, disturb, irritate and shake the mind, so without subduing them to a certain extent—and there are various levels to which they can be subdued—there's no way to see the unconscious levels of ego that hold the notion of an independent self-existent I. It's impossible. And that's the point. Therefore, our approach has to be through meditation—the experience of contemplating the energy of mental clarity automatically eliminates those mentalities.

- We need to meditate because our mind is so gross and our memory so poor
- Meditation techniques eliminate the deluded mental activity that shakes our mind
- Without subduing the gross symptoms of ego it's impossible to realize emptiness

Bodhicitta

5 Training in the activities of a bodhisattva

5.1 The six perfections

5.1.5 Concentration



FIRST, WE develop single-pointed concentration, which leads us beyond worldly emotional problems and gives us a degree of higher satisfaction. But a certain amount of darkness remains in our mind. In order to reach the depths of human consciousness we also have to cultivate penetrative insight, which is the only thing that can lead us totally beyond the dualistic view of all existence. From the Buddhist point of view, the dualistic way of thinking is the real conflict. Meditative concentration can bring us a certain degree of peace, but if the dualistic view remains, we still have conflict in our mind.

The purpose of insight meditation, the experience of emptiness, is realization of non-duality, where the flashing of sense objects and images disappears and we experience the total unity of absolute reality. There's a difference between the experience of emptiness and its philosophy. Philosophically speaking, sense objects exist, sense pleasures exist and there's a relationship between the senses and the external world. But in the experience itself, there is no awareness of a duality, no perception of the sense world and no sense of conflict to irritate the mind. Normally, whenever we perceive objects in the sense world, we see two things: we perceive the thing itself and immediately compare it with something else. Society is built on the dualistic mind.

Dharma wisdom is the light that eliminates the dark shadow of ignorance, the main source of all human afflictions. Dharma philosophy is not Dharma, doctrine is not Dharma, religious art is not Dharma. Dharma is not that statue of Lord Buddha on your altar. Dharma is the inner understanding of reality that leads us beyond the dark shadow of ignorance, beyond dissatisfaction.

- As long as we have a dualistic view we will have conflict in our mind
- The experience of emptiness is the total unity of absolute reality, beyond any duality
- Dharma wisdom is the inner understanding of reality that leads us beyond ignorance

Bodhicitta

5 Training in the activities of a bodhisattva

5.1 The six perfections

5.1.6 Wisdom



THE SIX perfections are a means of ripening our own mind, and there are four additional bodhisattva practices called the *four means of drawing disciples to the Dharma*, which are a means of ripening the minds of others. Although “disciples” is an accurate translation, using this term makes the meaning a little limited. It actually refers to drawing all sentient beings to the Dharma—influencing them so that we can reveal the Dharma to them and lead them to a better future rebirth, liberation and enlightenment.

The first of these practices is *giving*, which means giving material things to those who are not yet receptacles for the Dharma. Before we can introduce people to the Dharma we first make them happy by offering whatever material things they need, such as food and clothes. The second is *speaking kind words*, which means talking to people in an appropriate way—sweet like candy—which pleases them. The third is *teaching to the level of the student*. This means that when we explain the Dharma we do so in a way that is entirely relevant to the person we are talking to.

The fourth means of drawing disciples is *practicing what we teach*. Just as we explain the Dharma to others, showing how they can make their life most meaningful, we too live like that. We encourage them to live in the Dharma, and they can see that we ourselves are doing exactly that. Unless we live in the practice we cannot be an example or inspiration for others, and then there is no result in the mind, no peace of mind.

- The four means of drawing disciples to the Dharma are for ripening the minds of others
- The first three are *giving, speaking kind words* and *teaching to the level of the student*
- The fourth is *practicing what we teach* so that we become an inspiring example for others

Bodhicitta

5 Training in the activities of a bodhisattva

5.2 The four means of drawing disciples to the Dharma

DEVELOPING BODHICITTA for all sentient beings is the supreme task. There is no greater responsibility than to free all the countless sentient beings from every suffering and place them in the peerless happiness of enlightenment, and whenever we take the bodhisattva vows we are committing ourselves to doing just that.

First we take the *wishing vow*, where we generate the aspiration to attain enlightenment; then we take the *entering vow*, where we vow to actively engage in the bodhisattva's activities, the six perfections. Keeping these vows, our path to enlightenment is assured, but if we break them, we create great obstacles to our path. For example, if we live in a lawless country—where people refuse to obey the laws and steal and kill for their own ends—no matter how many police there are, life is dangerous and terrible. Society needs laws and people have to follow them. Similarly, it is vital for aspiring bodhisattvas to take and keep the bodhisattva vows. By living in the vows and working tirelessly to attain bodhicitta and enlightenment, we are doing the most beneficial thing we can do, actively liberating countless sentient beings from suffering and leading them to enlightenment.

Aspirational bodhicitta is the spontaneous, uncontrived bodhicitta that comes before actually taking the bodhisattva vows and engaging in the activities of a bodhisattva, at which stage it becomes *engaging bodhicitta*. Bodhisattvas living in the six perfections continuously create unbelievably powerful merit that constantly increases—every moment, day and night, awake or asleep—no matter what they do, just from that decision to follow the activities of the bodhisattva. Even in a coma they would still gain infinite merit. This is the power of the bodhisattva vows.

- When we take the bodhisattva vows we commit to leading all beings to enlightenment
- First we take the *wishing vow*, which is an aspiration, and then the *entering vow*
- *Aspirational bodhicitta* leads to the mind of *engaging bodhicitta*, which creates infinite merit

Bodhicitta

5 Training in the activities of a bodhisattva

5.3 Taking the bodhisattva vows

BODHICITTA is the most comfortable path, the most comfortable meditation. There can be no philosophical, scientific or psychological disagreement with this. With bodhicitta, there's no East-West conflict. This path is the most comfortable, most perfect, one hundred percent uncomplicated one, free of any danger of leading people to extremes. Without bodhicitta, nothing works.

Remember the story of Lama Atisha's interpreter, Dromtönpa, when he saw a man circumambulating a stupa? He said, "What are you doing?" and the man answered, "Circumambulating." So Drom said, "Wouldn't it be better if you practiced Dharma?" Next time Drom saw the man he was prostrating and when he again asked what he was doing, the man replied, "Prostrating." "Wouldn't it be better if you practiced Dharma?" asked Drom. Anyway, the story goes on, but the point is that just doing religious-looking actions like circumambulating and prostrating isn't necessarily practicing Dharma. It depends on motivation. We have to transform our attachment and self-cherishing, and if we haven't changed our mind in this way, none of the other practices work; doing them is just a joke. Dharma means a complete change of attitude—that's what really brings us inner happiness, that is the true Dharma, not the words we say. Bodhicitta is not the culture of ego, not the culture of attachment, not the culture of samsara. It is an unbelievable transformation, the most comfortable path, the most substantial path—definite, not wishy-washy.

Circumambulating isn't Dharma, prostrating isn't Dharma, meditating isn't Dharma. My goodness, what is Dharma, then? This is what happened to the man in the story. He couldn't think of anything else to do. Well, the best Dharma practice, the most perfect, is without doubt the practice of bodhicitta.

- Bodhicitta is the most perfect, uncomplicated meditation and path
- If we don't change our attitude, all our other practices are a joke
- Dharma doesn't consist of religious-looking activities—the best practice is bodhicitta

Bodhicitta

Wrap-up



BODHICITTA is the vehicle that will definitely carry us to enlightenment. It is also great psychology. Through this attitude we can overcome self-cherishing and hatred. As long as we are living on this earth, our relationships are with other human beings, not stones and trees, and most of our problems come from conflict with others, other sentient beings. Therefore, if we have the enlightenment attitude of bodhicitta, our human relationships will automatically improve.

Whatever situation people with bodhicitta are in, they will never kill other sentient beings; their nature is peace. We say, “I don’t like war, everybody is fighting each other; I want to make peace.” Actually, it is difficult if not impossible to really make peace externally. If we can make peace within ourselves, we will be able to separate from the powerful vibrations of aggression and war. As long we are under the control of self-cherishing, that will be impossible.

The nature of those who have bodhicitta is completely peaceful, compassionate, loving. They are universal medicine, universal teachers. Wherever they go, north, south, east, west, they always give off a positive vibration; their nature is right, natural. Imagine, if all sentient beings in the world had bodhicitta, what would happen? There is no way that we could have war, no way that we would take advantage of each other. That is most worthwhile; it’s incredible. Enlightenment is a universal attitude; our mind becomes universal. We become universal energy.

- Bodhicitta is not only the vehicle to enlightenment but also great psychology
- We can’t create peace in the outside world until we create peace within ourselves
- If all beings in the world had bodhicitta there would be no war

Bodhicitta

Wrap-up

BODHICITTA, THE altruistic mind that works solely for the enlightenment of all sentient beings, is the key to unlocking the great secret of happiness. With bodhicitta, everything is possible; without it, there will always be limitations. Bodhicitta is a vast mind, the vastest of minds. Compassion is wonderful, but it does not have the power to see the suffering of every single sentient being, nor does it have the power to alleviate that suffering. When we have actualized bodhicitta, every action we do is of inconceivable benefit to every single sentient being.

With bodhicitta, everything we do is for every sentient being. Think how powerful and meaningful that makes every action of our body, speech and mind. Every prayer we make and every mantra we chant is for the rabbits in our garden and the centipedes in the earth; for the flies buzzing around, the butterflies and bees collecting pollen and the ants running over the ground—for all the uncountable number of insects around us. It is for the worms in our compost and the maggots feeding on old meat. It is for the fish squirming on a fisherman's hook. It is for all the animals in every country, such as the herbivores and carnivores in Africa, the deer and zebras that are prey for the lions, the monkeys and the wildebeest. It is for all the myriad species of animals everywhere. Everything we do is for each of them.

Even if we can only manage the aspiration to one day have the mind of bodhicitta, this is a truly incredible motivation to have. If we think about it, it is mind-blowing.

- The vast mind of bodhicitta is the key to unlocking the great secret of happiness
- Everything we do with bodhicitta, every prayer and mantra, benefits every sentient being
- Just having the aspiration to develop bodhicitta is incredible and mind-blowing



ALL THE problems we encounter in samsara, the cycle of repeated death and rebirth, have their source in the ignorance that grasps at things as though they were self-existent. Our situation in this cycle is similar to being trapped in a large building with many rooms and doors, but with only one door leading out. We wander hopelessly from one part of the building to another looking for the right door.

The door that leads us out of samsara is the wisdom that realizes the emptiness of self-existence. This wisdom is the direct remedy for the ignorance that is both cause and effect of clinging to self and that believes the self or I to be inherently and independently existent. In other words, the I appears to be something it is not, a concrete, unchanging entity existing in its own right, and our ignorant mind clings to this mistaken view. We then become addicted to this phantom I and treasure it as if it were a most precious possession. Wisdom recognizes that such an autonomously existing I is totally non-existent and thus, by wisdom, ignorance is destroyed. It is said in the Buddhist scriptures that to realize the correct view of emptiness, even for a moment, shakes the foundations of samsara, just as an earthquake shakes the foundations of a building.

According to Lama Tsongkhapa, there are three things to concentrate on in order to prepare our mind for the realization of emptiness: dissolution of obstacles and accumulation of merit, devotion to our spiritual teacher and study of subjects such as the graduated path to enlightenment and mahamudra. Understanding will come quickly if we follow this advice.

- The ignorance that grasps at things as self-existent is the source of all our problems
- Wisdom destroys ignorance by recognizing that there is no inherently existent I
- To realize emptiness we must purify and create merit, practice guru devotion and study

THREE ARE various terms used in referring to the ultimate nature of reality. Sometimes it is called emptiness, since the true nature of all phenomena is empty, as opposed to the ego's imagination, which is full. Full of what? Full of concepts, expectations, anxieties and projections that have nothing to do with reality. Ultimately, all things are empty. Reality is also called voidness, voidness being the opposite of the solid, concrete world imagined by the ego. All phenomena, both samsaric and spiritual, are void by their very nature.

It is essential to eliminate the ego's basic misconception about reality because this is the root of all suffering. The ego's view is debased, unrealistic and produces a low opinion of oneself and others. It underestimates our true potentialities and qualities, thereby creating a feeling of insecurity and defensiveness. Furthermore, with this sort of negative attitude we easily get involved in arguments and fights with one another. The ego is political by nature. If there were no ego, there would be no reason to quarrel. The ego's misconceptions of reality also keep us in bondage, whether it is the iron bondage of worldly existence or the golden bondage of a spiritual way of life. The iron bondage is our continual mental and physical suffering in the cycle of dissatisfied existence known as samsara, while the golden bondage is that of being enslaved to misconceptions and false philosophies. No matter how respectable they seem, these incorrect views still bind us to ignorance and suffering.

The highest goal is to be free of all bondage. But I do not mean being free in a revolutionary sense. No, I am just trying to provoke a revolution in our mind.

- Emptiness and voidness are terms that both refer to the ultimate nature of reality
- The ego's misconception of reality is the root of all suffering and must be eliminated
- Our highest goal is to be free of all bondage, which demands a revolution in our mind



WHAT ELIMINATES the root of ignorance is the right view according to the Prasangika, the subtlest of the four Buddhist philosophical schools: Sautrantika, Vaibhashika, Cittamatra and Madhyamaka, which has two sub-schools, Svatantrika and Prasangika.

Even though each school has an idea of ultimate reality, it is the Prasangika view that really cuts the root of all samsaric suffering. The only thing that can completely eliminate that ignorance is the Prasangika view of emptiness, emptiness-only, *shunyata*. To bring us to that understanding, the Buddha gave us the teachings on dependent arising, which have the power to lead us to the end of samsara. Padmasambhava, Nagarjuna, Asanga and Lama Tsongkhapa as well—all of them—actualized the Prasangika view and were therefore able to give teachings from their experience and to guide us, helping free us from the oceans of samsaric suffering and bring us to full enlightenment. Having received teachings directly from Manjushri, Lama Tsongkhapa was able to explain the Buddha's teachings on sutra and tantra in the clearest possible way, even the most difficult points, clarifying the past mistakes of many famous meditators. We are unbelievably lucky to have met his teachings.

If we don't study, meditate and realize ultimate reality—emptiness, *tong pa nyi*, *shunyata*—we're completely cheating ourselves. Right now in this life we have all the chances, all the opportunities. We have great teachers who are always teaching emptiness, particularly the emptiness taught by the Omniscient One, the kind, compassionate Shakyamuni Buddha, and the many pandits, Nagarjuna, Lama Tsongkhapa and so forth. If we are totally distracted by mundane pleasures, which are only suffering, and fail to take this opportunity, we have completely cheated ourselves.

- Prasangika Madhyamaka is the right view that alone eliminates the root of ignorance
- Lama Tsongkhapa's teachings on emptiness and dependent arising are particularly clear
- We mustn't waste this extraordinary opportunity to realize ultimate reality in this life



JUST AS WE RECOGNIZE THE ENEMY WHO ALWAYS
HARMS US OR THE THIEF WHO ALWAYS STEALS OUR
THINGS, SIMILARLY WE NEED TO RECOGNIZE THE
OBJECT OF OUR IGNORANCE —LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

WHEN WE try to realize emptiness, the first thing we must do is understand exactly what it is that things are empty of. We must recognize the object of refutation, the object that does not exist in the way we think it exists. This sense of I that we always carry around, like a tortoise carrying its shell, is that object of refutation.

In India there are always posters of wanted criminals in police stations and on telephone poles. Similarly, we should have a photo of our I posted somewhere prominent, like on the fridge or next to the television, so that we can always check to see whether this dangerous criminal is lurking about. Whenever we feel a negative emotion arise, we should look at that photo and see that this is the real problem. At our deepest heart level we have this instinctive feeling of a real, solid I. Where did it come from? It was there when we were a child and even a baby. If we really check thoroughly we will see that there cannot be a first moment of self-grasping, and therefore, even in the very first moment of this life, we must have possessed this strong sense of I, which in turn must have come from the sense of I we had in a previous life.

The reality of the I is that it's a mere label placed on top of our ever-changing aggregates. However, it feels one hundred percent solid. We see the I, the body and the emotions as independent, and because of that we suffer. This deluded sense of I is the fundamental driving force in samsaric existence.

- Our first task is to recognize the object of refutation—the sense of I we carry around
- We must be constantly on the alert for this instinctive feeling of a real, solid I
- This deluded sense of I is the fundamental driving force in samsaric existence

Emptiness

1 Establishing the selflessness of persons

1.1 What is to be refuted

A VERY SIMPLE, practical approach to understanding emptiness, to realizing the non-self-existent I, is first to just mindfully investigate how our ego holds the self-notion of our I, our self. That's the first thing to seek. Then, when at a certain point we discover that we're holding something heavy, solid, truly existent within us, a heavy concrete blanket, when through investigation we discover these hallucinated, nonsensical concepts, at the conclusion of this observation we can experience emptiness, non-conceptualization—we let go and contemplate that.

In the superficial view of our ego, our self, or I, is something solid within either our body or our consciousness, but when we use wisdom and intensive awareness to investigate how our ego holds that self somewhere within our body or mind, we discover that there's no such solid, independent self anywhere. We can contemplate that discovery by remaining mindfully on the conclusion we have just reached and simply let go into that. That's the way to meditate.

Once, when Lama Tsongkhapa was giving a teaching on emptiness, one of his disciples, who was himself a great yogi, suddenly gasped and grabbed at his lapel because he'd completely lost his self; he thought he'd disappeared and got scared. Of course, his self soon reappeared. This is a good example of what happens. He completely lost his concrete conception of ego, his entire mental universe disappeared, he thought he was becoming non-existent and to reassure himself that he was still there he grabbed at his shirt. That's the way to listen to our guru's teachings. We should all have such experiences in teachings and, because we have the intelligence to examine reality correctly, we can.

- Investigating our concept of self is the first step to experiencing emptiness
- When we've concluded there's no independent self, we meditate by letting go into that
- By listening to teachings correctly it's possible to completely lose our concrete sense of I

Emptiness

1 Establishing the selflessness of persons

1.1 What is to be refuted

THE MOMENT I was given the name Thubten Yeshe, Thubten Yeshe came into existence. Before I was given the name, he didn't exist; nobody looked at me and thought, "There's Thubten Yeshe." I didn't even think it myself. Thubten Yeshe did not exist. But when one superstitious conception named this bubble, my body—"Your name is Thubten Yeshe"—my superstition took it: "Yes, Thubten Yeshe is me." It's an interdependent relationship. My superstition gives the name Thubten Yeshe to this bubble of relativity and my ego starts to feel that Thubten Yeshe really does exist somewhere in the area of my body.

The ego's instinctive feeling that Thubten Yeshe exists somewhere around here is very superficial. We can see that the relative reality of Thubten Yeshe is simply the name that's been given to this bubble of energy. That's all Thubten Yeshe is. That's why the great philosopher and yogi Nagarjuna and the great yogi Lama Tsongkhapa both said that all phenomena exist merely in name. As a result, some early Western Buddhist scholars decided that Nagarjuna was a nihilist. That's a conclusion that could be reached only by someone who doesn't practice and spends all their time dealing in concepts and words.

If I were to show up somewhere and suddenly announce, "You're all merely names," people would think I was crazy. But if we investigate in detail the manner in which we're all merely names, it becomes extremely clear. Nihilists reject the very existence of interdependent phenomena but that's not what Nagarjuna did. He simply explained that relative phenomena exist but we should view them in a reasonable way. They come, they go; they grow, they die.

- "Thubten Yeshe" only came into existence when a body was given that name
- The relative reality of Thubten Yeshe—and of all phenomena—is nothing but the name
- Nagarjuna didn't teach that relative phenomena don't exist; he taught *how* they exist

Emptiness

1 Establishing the selflessness of persons

1.1 What is to be refuted

THE EGO's hallucination of a concrete, self-existent I is like a thief who sneaks up on us when we are not looking and hides when we turn around. When we are relaxed and off guard, the thief advances on tiptoe like a demon ready to attack, but if we chase him he suddenly disappears as if swallowed up by the earth. This is exactly how our devious mind deceives us. Our mind will go on cheating us until we finally catch it in the act.

Meanwhile, we shall continue to carry around a strong intuitive feeling of I and a vague notion that it exists somewhere, probably in the body. The only way to arrest this fantasy is to observe the object of our hallucination, in this case our own self; to examine it carefully and see what it really is. As the imagined I is like a sneak thief, it is necessary to use a special trick in order to capture it. We must somehow bring the object in question into clear view for close inspection. Because the imagined I comes up most strongly in highly emotional states, we should take advantage of those situations, look at the obvious feeling of I that has arisen and try to locate and identify it. Another effective technique is to deliberately evoke during meditation an emotional crisis in order to bring this feeling of I to the surface.

In either case, the meditator must be extremely alert if they are to capture this image before it disappears. Through this practice they will eventually discover that the self they have always believed to exist has no basis at all. It was, and is, nothing more than a fantasy.

- Our hallucination of a self-existent I is like a thief who sneaks up when we're off guard
- The best moment to examine this fantasy is when we are in a heightened emotional state
- Through observation we will discover that the self we believed in has no basis at all

Emptiness

1 Establishing the selflessness of persons

1.1 What is to be refuted



OUR NORMAL life is totally like a dream, like a hallucination, like an illusion, like a mirage. By thinking about what really exists, we can understand the hallucination. To summarize, the valid base, the aggregates, is there. Because of that, the thought of I arises, the merely labeled I and the merely labeled action arise, depending on what the valid base does.

In the first moment the labeling thought merely imputes the I and the action. For instance, if the I is sitting—if sitting is the merely labeled action of the I—there is firstly the merely labeled I and then secondly the merely labeled action, “sitting.” Therefore, it is so subtle. The way the I exists is extremely subtle and it has never existed the way we have always believed it to exist from birth; from beginningless rebirths, in fact. It is never the way that our mind projects it to be—truly existent. The I that exists is extremely subtle. It’s like it doesn’t exist compared to how it appears to our normal hallucinated mind. That happens in the first moment.

In the second moment, when it appears back it should appear back as merely labeled. It was just merely labeled by our mind a moment ago, so it should appear back to us like that. But that is not what happens. It only appears back to the buddhas as merely labeled; only to those beings who have no disturbing-thought obscurations, for whom there is no trace of negative imprints at all. Only the enlightened beings, the buddhas, apprehend it as merely labeled. Until that time, for us sentient beings, we have this hallucination of truly existing appearance because we have not yet ceased the negative imprints of the disturbing-thought obscurations.

- The merely labeled I and action arise in dependence on the valid base and what it does
- In the first moment the labeling thought merely imputes the I and the action on the base
- In the second moment our negative imprints cause the I to appear back as truly existing

Emptiness

1 Establishing the selflessness of persons

1.1 What is to be refuted



OUR UNDERSTANDING of emptiness can only be considered correct if it helps us understand subtle dependent arising and does not contradict it. If it contradicts dependent arising—if, instead of supporting dependent arising, it leads us to the conclusion that there is no dependent arising, no existence—that means there is a mistake in our understanding.

Lama Tsongkhapa uses the example of a vase. He says that when we check and see that there is no vase—that the top is not the vase, the neck is not the vase, the belly is not the vase, the bottom is not the vase—if we conclude that there is no vase at all, this view of emptiness does not help us see how the vase *does* exist. Unless our conclusion is an understanding of dependent arising—the truth for the all-obscuring mind, conventional truth—we are led into a sense that there is no vase, and that is nihilism. Our meditation leads to nihilism when we begin with the big mistake and leave out the object to be refuted. When we look for the vase that exists, from the very beginning we fail to touch the object of refutation, that which does not exist.

So, we can see, these two things are not separate. Dependent arising and emptiness are not two separate phenomena. That is the middle way, neither nihilism nor eternalism. What is a dependent arising is empty of existing from its own side, being merely labeled by the mind. Nothing exists from its own side. And emptiness is a dependent arising. In that way dependent arising and emptiness are unified.

- If our understanding of emptiness contradicts dependent arising, it is mistaken
- Unless we understand the conventional existence of the vase we will fall into nihilism
- The middle way avoids both extremes through unifying emptiness and dependent arising

Emptiness

1 Establishing the selflessness of persons

1.1 What is to be refuted

WHY IS it wrong to feel that the I is some sort of independent entity existing by itself? If we approach this question carefully, the answer will eventually become clear. It is impossible to think of the I without also thinking in some way of either the mind or the body. Thus, if the I were truly independent and self-sufficient, it would either have to be exactly the same as the body and mind, existing in perfect oneness with them, or else be something totally separate and distinct from them. If we meditate on this well, we shall see that these are the only two possibilities.

As we meditate on emptiness, we pass through several stages of insight. First we gain a clear view of how we conceive of our false I, the one that appears to exist independently. Then, as we try to pinpoint this false I by checking to see if it is one with or separate from our body and mind, this I begins to fade and eventually disappears.

When we can no longer find this I, we will experience a profoundly empty feeling within, as if we had lost something precious. At this point, fear may arise because we no longer have our I to hold on to. If and when this happens, we must be on guard not to fall into the extreme of nihilistically denying everything. This is a dangerous mistake. Rather, we should persevere in our meditation and eventually a very subtle realization of emptiness will arise. We shall be able to discern the absolute true nature of the I, its lack of independent existence, and yet fully appreciate that it has a phantom-like existence on the relative level of truth.

- An independent I would have to be either one with the aggregates or separate from them
- As we meditate on these two possibilities, the false I will begin to fade away
- With perseverance we will achieve a subtle realization of both absolute and relative truth

Emptiness

1 Establishing the selflessness of persons
1.2 Determining the full set of possibilities



DESPITE THE FACT that the label “I” refers in some way to the body and mind, there is no one part of our physical or mental makeup that we can point to and say, “This is I.” Neither our hand, our heart or any other part of our body is our I. Nor can we say that what we are thinking or feeling at this or that moment is our I. To identify ourselves with our body or mind and yet continue to think “This is *my* body” or “This is *my* mind” is to make nonsense out of everything. These thoughts would imply “This is the body’s body” and “This is the mind’s mind,” both of which are completely meaningless statements.

Furthermore, there are so many atoms in our body and so many thoughts passing through our mind that if we called each one of them I, we would have to conclude that we were a million different people. Nor is it reasonable to identify I with any one particular atom or thought, for then what would everything left over be? To whom would it belong?

If we think about these points systematically and use them to investigate the way in which we view ourselves, we shall come to see that there can be no such thing as an independently existing I. The nonexistence of such an I is what is meant by emptiness. Because ignorance holds that we exist somehow as a truly independent I, and the wisdom of emptiness sees clearly that such an I has never had even the slightest existence, these two views are said to be complete opposites.

- There is not one part of our body or mind that we can point to and say, “This is I”
- It would be nonsensical to identify the I with every passing thought or atom in our body
- A systematic investigation of our aggregates shows us there is no independently existing I

Emptiness

1 Establishing the selflessness of persons

1.3 The self and the aggregates are not truly the same

FROM BEGINNINGLESS samsaric lifetimes up until now we have been thinking of our I as if it were something inherently unique, born by itself and existing completely independently. It does not appear to rely on our body, mind or anything else. Rather, it seems to be completely self-sufficient. We did not have to learn this erroneous belief; we are born, die and are born again with it instinctively.

However, it is obvious that the I cannot exist separately from the body and mind because there is no I we can point to without also pointing to some aspect of our mental or physical makeup. For example, when the body is sleeping we say, “I am asleep.” When it is engaged in consuming food we say, “I am eating.” When it is resting in a chair we say, “I am sitting.” If the I actually did exist in the way we instinctively conceive it to—as something independent of our body or mind—then it would be meaningless to refer to our activities in such ways. If the I were something that existed separately from the body, why should we think “I am sitting” when our body is in a chair?

The same holds true with respect to the mind. In a very short space of time our mind engages in many different, and often contrary, activities. Yet whether the mind is thinking, sleeping, meditating, becoming angry or merely dreaming, we say, “I am thinking,” “I am meditating,” “I am angry” and so forth. If there were an I that existed in some way separately from these various states of mind, it would be senseless to refer to all these mental activities in terms of an I felt to be unique and independent.

- We are born with the mistaken conviction that our I is independent and self-sufficient
- If the I were separate from the body, it makes no sense to say “I am eating or sitting”
- It is similarly illogical for our mental activities to be owned by a separate I or self

Emptiness

1 Establishing the selflessness of persons

1.4 The self and the aggregates are not truly different

WE MUST understand that we cannot banish our habitual, concrete view of ego immediately. It takes time for this solid appearance to be overcome completely. But we can attack the grosser levels of misconception now by loosening our tight grip on what we think reality is. Then, even though the concrete appearance of things still remains, we are not so readily led astray by it.

The traditional Buddhist texts illustrate this point with the analogy of a magician and his audience. By reciting hypnotic spells over pieces of wood or stone, a skilled magician can trick people into seeing horses, for example. The people affected by these spells not only see these illusory animals, they believe them to be real. They are entranced by the magician's powers and taken in by his illusions. Owing to the power of the spells, the magician also sees the horses but of course does not believe in them; he knows they are illusory because he himself conjured them up. Thus, while the audience can be dazzled by the performance, the magician himself remains unmoved and unaffected.

Ordinarily, we are like that audience. We believe everything that our dualistic conceptions conjure up. But it is possible for us to let go of these ignorant beliefs. Like the magician, even when concrete appearances of this and that arise, we need not be swayed by them. Eventually, when our mind has become completely cleansed of all distorted views, even these dualistic appearances will cease. But we do not need to wait until then to be liberated from our conflicting emotions. The moment we start loosening our concrete conceptions we will experience a taste of this freedom.

- We can begin to change our habitual view of ego by weakening our misconceptions
- Our goal is to be like the magician who sees his own illusions without believing in them
- As soon as we loosen our concrete conceptions we will experience a taste of freedom

Emptiness

1 Establishing the selflessness of persons

1.5 How to pursue the attitude that things are like an illusion



WHEN WE try to apply logical reasoning to prove to ourselves that something is empty—that it lacks inherent, concrete self-existence—it may sometimes feel that we are pushing too hard. “This is empty for this reason . . . or that reason . . . or that reason.” Somehow it feels uncomfortable. This can definitely happen; strenuous application of logic can often harm our understanding rather than help it.

At such times it is a good idea to relax the force of our logical investigation and merely observe how the thing we are examining functions, how it works, where it came from and so forth. For instance, if we are examining something to discover if it is as self-existent as it appears, we can remember, “This item was put together by people in a factory, then it was shipped to the market to be sold, then I came along and bought it and now I am using it.” Looked at in this way, the non-self-existent nature of the thing becomes a bit clearer. We see it as something that grew out of causes, that depends on many things for its existence, that functions this way and that. This understanding will soften the general impression we have that it is something independent and concrete, existing out there as a solid, self-contained object.

This approach to understanding interdependence and non-self-existence, or emptiness, is comfortable and direct. Once we are familiar with it we will easily see why many great masters of the past have claimed that interdependence, or dependent arising, is the king of logical reasoning and the best way of understanding the actual condition of things.

- Logical reasoning is important but can sometimes get in the way of our understanding
- Instead, we can simply observe how everything is dependent on causes and conditions
- Many great masters claim that dependent arising is the best way to understand reality

Emptiness

1 Establishing the selflessness of persons

1.5 How to pursue the attitude that things are like an illusion

WHEN WE look at the outside world we have a very strong impression of its substantiality. We probably don't realize that the strong impression is merely our own mind's interpretation of what it sees. We think that the strong, solid reality really exists outside, and perhaps, when we look within, we feel empty. This is also a misconception: the strong impression that the world appears to truly exist outside of us is actually projected by our own mind. Everything we experience—feelings, sensations, shapes and colors—comes from our mind.

For example, when I say "satellite," we have a mental image of the object that we've been told is a satellite. When the first satellite was made, its inventor said, "I've made this thing that orbits the earth; it's called a 'satellite.'" Then when everybody else saw it, they thought, "Ah, that's a satellite." But "satellite" is just a name, isn't it? Before the inventor of the satellite actually made it, he speculated and visualized it in his mind. On the basis of this image, he acted to materialize his creation. Then he told everyone, "This is a satellite." So everyone thought, "Wow, a satellite; how beautiful, how wonderful." That shows how ridiculous we are. People give things names and we grasp at the name, believing it to be the real thing.

Look at all the stuff we find in supermarkets: so many names, so many foods, so many different things. First people made it all up—this name, that name, this, this, this—so then this, that, this, this and this all appear to us. If all these thousands of supermarket items as well as jets, rockets and satellites are manifestations of mind, what then does not come from mind?

- The outside world is neither solid nor substantial—it's just the creation of our own mind
- We believe that satellites truly exist, but "satellite" is only a name made up by its inventor
- Everything that appears to us is a manifestation of mind

PROBLEMS IN life arise because we look at things in a way that is opposite to reality, to the way things actually exist. This itself is the problem. Our view, in which we believe, is a projection that is not the reality.

Let's use the example of a table. One leg of the table is not the table; that one piece is part of the table, which means it is not the table. Any part of the table is not the table. Even the collection of all the parts is not the table; it's the basis of the table. The basis of the table is not the table. "Table" is merely imputed to the collection of all the parts of a table. We can see clearly the difference between the table and its base. Table is merely imputed by the mind; table exists in mere name in dependence upon its base. Therefore, there is no concrete table, no real table from its own side. We can see that the table is completely empty of being a table that exists from its own side.

So, what is the table? To make it simple, the table is merely imputed in dependence upon the collection of its parts, the base. It is nothing other than this. The table is completely empty of being a real table existing from its own side. This emptiness is the ultimate nature of the table. Now, there is a table. The table is not nonexistent; it exists in mere name, being merely imputed. The table is a dependent arising, dependent on its base, and at the same time it is empty of existing from its own side. Dependent arising and emptiness are unified.

- Problems arise because we look at things in a way that is opposite to how they exist
- A table exists in mere name, in dependence upon the collection of its parts
- The table is a dependent arising that is also empty of existing from its own side

Emptiness

2 Establishing the selflessness of phenomena

2.1. Physical forms do not truly exist

WHAT IS the mind, or consciousness? It is a phenomenon that is not body, not substantial, has no form, no shape, no color, but, like a mirror, can clearly reflect objects. Objects appear to the mind and the mind can perceive these objects. As long as a mirror is not dirty, it will reflect whatever object comes before it clearly. Similarly, since the mind is unobstructed by substance, form, objects can appear to it. The phenomenon that is mind perceives objects. So, that is the base.

In relation to the phenomenon, our thought creates, merely imputes, the label “mind.” And that’s how the mind exists. The mind exists merely in name; what we call mind has been merely labeled by thought. It’s like when a person is given a name. Whether we named ourselves or whether our name was given to us by our parents, that name is a mind-created label. In the same way, then, what’s called mind is also a name. We think there’s a real mind—a real mind existing from there. That’s how it appears to us and, without a shadow of doubt, we believe one hundred percent in this appearance. But if we analyze this phenomenon called mind, it’s no different from the name given to us by our parents, which was created by their mind.

What we call mind has been merely labeled by our thought in relation to its base, that formless phenomenon that has neither shape nor color, whose nature is clear and which has the ability to perceive objects. That is the base, and “mind” is the label. They’re two distinct phenomena, not one. They’re not separate, but they’re different. That’s what we have to realize—that these two phenomena are different.

- Mind is a phenomenon with no form, shape or color that functions like a mirror
- We believe there’s a real mind but it exists only in name, merely labeled by thought
- The formless, colorless base and the label “mind” are two distinct phenomena

*Emptiness**2 Establishing the selflessness of phenomena**2.2. Consciousness does not truly exist*



WHEN WE think about a year—when we don't meditate, when we're not aware that time is made up by our mind—a year appears to us to be a truly existent year. It appears to us like that, and we then allow our mind to believe that it's one hundred percent true. That's the view of the ignorance that apprehends inherent, or true, existence. So, that's a total hallucination.

That hallucination is the normal view of sentient beings. Those of us who haven't realized emptiness allow our mind to believe it's true. We don't question it. We have no doubt that there's a real year. However, we can't find the year there on any of the twelve months. And we can't find the year on all of the twelve months together. The twelve months are the base. When our mind sees the twelve months, we just make up the label "year"; we merely impute year.

We can see now that there's no such thing as a real year there. We cannot see a real year there. Before, a real year always appeared to us and we believed in it, but suddenly it's not there. It is totally nonexistent. That real year is the object to be refuted, or *gag cha*, as explained in the philosophical texts. This is the one we have to realize is empty, nonexistent, because it doesn't exist. The year that exists is the one that is merely imputed by the mind. There is a year because there are twelve months. That's it. What is a year? It is nothing other than what is merely imputed by the mind. Our mind merely imputed and believed in that. It's just a thought, a concept.

- The truly existent year we believe in is a complete hallucination, made up by our mind
- "Year" is merely imputed by our mind on the base—twelve months
- That real year, the object to be refuted, is totally empty, nonexistent and a mere concept

Emptiness

2 Establishing the selflessness of phenomena

2.3. Non-associated compounded phenomena do not truly exist

WE MIGHT think that we have been meditating on emptiness but actually, for many years and months we have been meditating on space, not emptiness. We've believed that we're meditating on emptiness but we've just been meditating on the sky, as if looking out an airplane window. This is a real danger, and when it happens it means that we've just been wasting time.

Instead, when space appears we should analyze it, thinking that even this space doesn't exist from its own side. Then our meditation becomes correct; it hits the right point. When space appears, we don't visualize any form or substantial phenomena—space has no appearance. However, when we are meditating on emptiness, when everything has dissolved and there is the appearance of space, we can then analyze the space. We can go beyond space. We should ask ourselves, "How does this space appear to me? Does this space appear to me as merely labeled or not merely labeled?" If it appears as not merely labeled by mind, we should recognize this as a hallucination, as the object to be refuted, recognizing that space doesn't exist from its own side.

One approach is to just look at the real space appearing from there and realize that this is a hallucination. Alternatively, we can think, "Even this space is totally empty." We can go straight to the point like this. Space is totally empty; it does not exist from its own side. So it is very effective to go beyond space. This is the correct meditation.

- There is a real danger of confusing meditation on space with meditation on emptiness
- When space appears to us we must recognize that it's a merely labeled hallucination
- Space is totally empty: there is no real space existing from its own side

Emptiness

2 Establishing the selflessness of phenomena
2.4. Unconditioned phenomena do not truly exist

IN ORDER to realize the true nature of the self, what the self is, we first have to recognize ignorance, the mind that makes us view the I in completely the wrong way, in a way that is opposite to the reality of the self. The way we view the self is the way ignorance conceives of the self.

First concentrate on the thought, whatever you're thinking now. As your mind gets calm, relaxed, check carefully how the I, the self, appears to you, or how you conceive it. If you find something, if you find the truly existing I, the truly existing self, search for where it is. When you find the truly existing I, the real I, check whether it's the body or the mind and whether it's within your body-mind or outside of it. Check in this way. If you can't find it, if you see the emptiness of the self, then just concentrate on that. If you do find a real self, then check whether it's the body, the mind or the mind-body combination. You have to look for this truly existing self from head to foot, searching in every part of your body to try to find exactly where it is. If you don't find it and come to the conclusion that the self does not exist at all, then that's a wrong conception; you've fallen into the extreme of nihilism. That conclusion does not make you free of suffering.

However, if the feeling of the emptiness of the self comes to you more or less effortlessly, rather than running away from that you should practice concentrating on it, just for the auspiciousness of meditating on emptiness, seeking the true nature of the self.

- To realize the true nature of the self we first have to recognize the mind of ignorance
- We start with analytical meditation on how and where the truly existing self appears to us
- When we get an effortless feeling of the emptiness of the self, we concentrate on that



IF WE have sharp intelligence it is not so difficult to understand emptiness. We do not have to learn tremendously complex philosophies or study volumes of texts under many lamas. Of course, we can learn from teachers and books, but if we are skillful, we can learn through a very simple method: by not believing what our senses tell us. It is not necessary to search far and wide for what stops us from seeing emptiness. We simply realize that the way we perceive the sense world every day of our life is completely wrong, that it is the misconceived projection of our ego. The moment we realize this, our deluded view will disappear.

We live in the sense world believing that the misconceptions and projections of our ignorant mind are true. We think that seeing is believing: "I saw that; it must be true." Some people believe passionately that their philosophy is the ideal one for their society. Communist or capitalist, both are wrong; both are hallucinations! If we go on like this, we shall never discover emptiness; it will always be somewhere else. When we realize that our view of the world is a hallucination, that our view of reality is obscured by the heavy blanket of delusion, the wrong view disappears and we are left with its opposite, the right view of emptiness. The moment we extinguish the dualistic mind, we experience emptiness.

Thus, we can study emptiness every day, because every day our five senses' gravitational attachment to the sense world has us believing that whatever we perceive really exists as it appears. If we continuously investigate our perceptions and beliefs, there is no time that we are not studying emptiness.

- The simple way to understand emptiness is to not believe what our senses tell us
- We experience emptiness as soon as we realize our view of the world is a hallucination
- Through continuously investigating our beliefs, we can study emptiness all day long

WHATEVER ACTIVITY we are doing in our daily life, we can practice mindfulness of the merely labeled I, the merely labeled action and the merely labeled object. If we practice mindfulness of how everything is merely labeled by the mind, then during that time the delusions—anger, attachment, ignorance—do not arise. This brings us to liberation and means that whatever we're doing becomes the antidote to samsara. It eliminates ignorance, the root of suffering, and we recognize the hallucination as a hallucination. This real I is not there; it is a hallucination that is not there. And just as this truly existent I is not there, whatever action we're doing, this real, truly existent action, is also false, a hallucination. For example, if we're walking—real walking as a truly existent action—that is totally false. The real I and the real walking are both totally false. And then the road we're walking on, the real road, is not there.

Seeing everything as a dream is another good meditation. Whatever we're doing—I, action, object—whatever appears as existing from its own side or not merely labeled by the mind, we can look at it all as a dream. Keeping mindfulness like this as much as possible is very powerful and effective.

A further meditation technique on emptiness is to see our ignorance as a magician. Ignorance is like a magician and we are like the audience. The magician creates illusions for the senses of the audience so that they see things that don't actually exist. None of it is true. So this is another mindfulness practice we can use in our busy daily lives. Whether we're talking, driving a car or shopping, part of our mind should always be absorbed in this meditation.

- We can practice mindfulness of the merely labeled I, action and object in any situation
- Another powerful and effective meditation is to view everything in daily life as a dream
- A third technique is to see ignorance as a magician who's creating illusions for our senses



THE LAW of the universe is scientific reality, not some kind of made up fantasy, and it is extremely important that we discover it for ourselves. When we do, we will understand how the dark shadow of ignorance keeps the pitiful mother sentient beings in confusion; how sentient beings are suffering because they have not discovered the clean, clear, pure energy of universal reality. This is what they lack.

All our dealings with the relative world, all our ups and downs, being happy, unhappy, happy, unhappy, happy, unhappy, all these extreme feelings come from mistaken, dualistic perception, from holding ecstatic, happy objects and miserable, unhappy objects as concrete, self-existent, dualistic self-entities. Beauty exists. I'm not saying that we have to reject beauty. What should concern us, however, is the way our projection of concreteness, independence and self-existence onto the relative bubble of transience, dependence and non-self-existence overpowers, overwhelms and dominates our entire reality. How do we perceive that object of happiness or that object of misery? If we see it as illusory and non-dual, the extreme feelings that pump us up so that there's no space for other feelings cannot function. If we can recognize the unity of the absolute reality of these two extreme objects, if we can see how these objects are in reality equal in nature—and also the same in nature as ourselves, the subject—our lives will be balanced.

Throughout the entire canon of his teachings, Lord Buddha says again and again, "Sometimes I advise people to do this; sometimes I recommend that. I tell people all kinds of things. But the sole purpose of every syllable, every letter, of every method I teach is to lead them to discover the reality of the universe, emptiness."

- It is extremely important that we discover the scientific law of the universe for ourselves
- If not, we'll be dominated by extreme feelings caused by mistaken, dualistic perception
- The sole purpose of everything the Buddha taught was for us discover reality, emptiness

Emptiness

Wrap-up

OUR IGNORANCE of the way things ultimately exist—and especially of how the I exists—is the main creator of samsara. This is our worst enemy. This is the ignorance that is the first of the twelve links of dependent origination, the link that initiates the whole process.

The ignorance that clings to a sense of a permanent, separate I creates all our problems and causes us to jump from one body to the next as we circle around and around in samsara. We make mistakes and suffer because of karma, but we create karma because of all the various delusions, which in turn stem from this fundamental delusion, the ignorance of the absolute nature of the self. Therefore, realizing the absolute nature of the self, the emptiness of the inherent existence of the self that we currently ascribe to it, is the direct antidote to the whole of samsara. It is the atomic bomb that destroys everything by destroying the root.

Destroying the false concept of self does not just mean sitting in meditation and seeing the self doesn't exist in the way we perceive it. It is much more than that. On a very practical level it is destroying our selfishness, the mind that sees this I as the center of the universe and all other phenomena as things that serve this I. Developing selflessness, the attitude that places others before the self, is as important as realizing the lack of self. This is where the method and wisdom sides of the practice work together. This is the whole reason we should be following a spiritual path. We are working for others, not ourselves. We are aspiring to gain enlightenment for others, not for ourselves. This is the Mahayana motivation.

- Our ignorance of the way things exist is our worst enemy, the creator of our samsara
- Due to this fundamental delusion we create the karma that perpetuates our suffering
- By destroying our false concept of self, we develop the Mahayana attitude of selflessness



IF WE NEGLECT TO PROTECT OUR MIND,
WE CAN NEITHER CLOSE THE DOOR TO SUFFERING
NOR OPEN THE DOOR TO HAPPINESS
—LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

THE MIND is like a TV with many channels. On one channel all we see are problems, problems, problems. But if we turn to another channel, we will see everything as empty. There are many different programs! It is very important to remember that life appears to us according to our interpretation, according to our channel.

It is actually very good to understand this, because we then know that the mind-channel we want is in our hands. How we want our life to be—full of problems or full of happiness—is completely in our hands. Everything—samsara or liberation, hell or enlightenment—depends on what we do with our mind. And even in everyday life, everything—harmony or disharmony, happiness or unhappiness—has to do with the channel we choose. So, we have incredible freedom. Not only because the nature of mind is pure in the sense of being clear and knowing and not being one with delusions, but especially because at this time we have received a perfect human rebirth, which gives us every opportunity to develop our mind. We can cease all faults and sufferings and achieve the highest happiness, the complete peace of mind of full enlightenment. We have all these opportunities.

By having this perfect human rebirth and developing our mind in the graduated path to enlightenment, in method and wisdom, we can also free every sentient being from all suffering and obscurations and lead them to enlightenment, the greatest peace of mind. It is extremely important not to waste our life and to apply all our effort to this end so that later, when we die, we don't have any regrets.

- The mind is like a TV and what appears to us depends on the channel we choose
- Everything depends on how we use our mind—it's completely in our hands
- We mustn't waste this opportunity to lead every sentient being to enlightenment



YOU'VE SPENT quite a lot of time with me now, listening to my explanations of Lama Tsongkhapa's approach to both the fundamental human problem and your individual ones. After all these months, you need to come to a conclusion from what you've read and heard; you need to integrate the teachings within yourself.

Listening to my words you might think, "Yes, what he's saying is true," but experience and actualization are very different from mere intellectual understanding. Therefore, to experiment with what your intellectual knowledge-wisdom has understood from what I've said, to see if it exists in reality or not, is very important. Otherwise, what happens is that, while we understand intellectually that happiness, unhappiness and so forth do not depend on outside conditions but on the interpretations of our wrong conception mind, we still believe what our ego tells us; we don't realize the meaning of our words; we don't follow our intellectual understanding wisdom. To arrive at this deeper wisdom, we have to experiment within ourselves, beyond words. For that reason, retreat is very important. Whereas modern science conducts experiments on external phenomena, we experiment internally, examining mental phenomena introspectively and penetratingly.

We have to integrate into experience whatever we understand. Once we have gained experience and realization of one topic we need to go on to the next, which takes us further down the path. Without moving forward step by step, it's impossible to progress; we can't simply collect high-sounding words while leaving our actions down here on the ground. Collecting words that talk of flying to the moon doesn't mean we fly to the moon; with words alone, we remain earthbound.

- After all these teachings, it's now important to integrate them within ourselves
- Experience and actualization are very different from intellectual understanding
- Step by step, topic by topic, we need to move beyond words and gain realizations

APPENDIX 1: THE FOUNDATION OF ALL GOOD QUALITIES

The foundation of all good qualities is the kind and perfect guru;
Correctly following the guru is the root of the path.
By my clearly seeing this and applying great effort,
Please bless me to rely upon the guru with great respect.

When I have discovered that the precious freedom of this rebirth is found
only once,
Is extremely difficult to find again and is greatly meaningful,
Please bless me to unceasingly generate the mind
Taking its essence, day and night.

This body and life are changing, like a water bubble;
Remember how quickly they perish and death comes.
After death, just like a shadow follows the body,
The results of negative and positive karma follow.

When I have found definite conviction in this,
Please bless me always to be conscientious
In abandoning even the slightest collection of shortcomings
And in accomplishing all virtuous deeds.

When I have recognized the shortcomings of samsaric perfections—
There is no satisfaction in enjoying them, they are the door to all suffering,
And they cannot be trusted—
Please bless me to generate a strong wish for the bliss of liberation.

Through my being led by this pure thought
With great remembrance, alertness, and conscientiousness,
Please bless me to make keeping the individual liberation vows,
The root of the teachings, my essential practice.

Just as I have fallen into the sea of samsara,
So have all mother transmigratory beings.
By my seeing this, please bless me to train in supreme bodhicitta,
Which bears the responsibility of freeing transmigratory beings.

Even if I develop only bodhicitta, without familiarizing myself with the
three types of morality,
I cannot achieve enlightenment.
By my seeing this well,
Please bless me to keep the vow of the sons of the victorious ones with
fervent effort.

By my having pacified distractions to wrong objects
And correctly analyzed the meaning of reality,
Please bless me to quickly generate within my mindstream
The unified path of calm abiding and special insight.

When I have become a [suitable] vessel by training in the common path,
Please bless me to immediately enter
The holy gateway of the fortunate beings—
The supreme of all vehicles, the Vajrayana.

At that time, the basis of accomplishing the two attainments
Is keeping my vows and samayas purely.
When I have gained effortless conviction in this,
Please bless me to protect them even at the cost of my life.

Then, when I have realized exactly the vital points of the two stages—
The essence of the tantric sets—
And am enjoying the yoga of four sessions with effort, without being
distracted [by nonmeditation objects],
Please bless me to accomplish these according to the teachings of the
holy beings.

Thus, may the virtuous friends who reveal the noble path
And the spiritual practitioners who correctly accomplish it have long lives.
Please bless me to pacify completely
The collections of outer and inner obstacles.

In all my lives, never separated from perfect gurus,
May I enjoy the magnificent Dharma
And, by completing the qualities of the grounds and paths,
May I quickly attain the state of Vajradhara.

Colophon

Composed by Lama Tsongkhapa; translated by Maureen O’Malley and edited by Ailsa Cameron, 1988. Lightly edited over the years by Constance Miller, Nick Ribush, Steve Carlier and Joan Nicell. Revised by Lama Zopa Rinpoche and edited by Joan Nicell, Ailsa Cameron and Tenzin Tsomo, 2020.

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Based on *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* by Pabongka Rinpoche

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The Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) is an international organization of Buddhist meditation, study and retreat centers—both urban and rural—monasteries, publishing houses, healing centers and other related activities founded in 1975 by Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche. At present, there are more than 160 FPMT centers, projects and services in over forty countries worldwide.

The FPMT has been established to facilitate the study and practice of Mahayana Buddhism in general and the Tibetan Gelug tradition, founded in the fifteenth century by the great scholar, yogi and saint, Lama Je Tsongkhapa, in particular.

The FPMT website also offers teachings by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Lama Yeshe, Lama Zopa Rinpoche and many other highly respected teachers in the tradition, details about the FPMT's educational programs, an online learning center, a link to the excellent FPMT Shop, and links to other interesting Buddhist and Tibetan pages. You can also find links to FPMT centers all over the world, especially those in your area, where you will find details of their programs offered.

FPMT

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OTHER TEACHINGS OF LAMA YESHE AND LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE CURRENTLY AVAILABLE

BOOKS FROM WISDOM PUBLICATIONS

Wisdom Energy, by Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Introduction to Tantra, by Lama Yeshe

Transforming Problems, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

The Door to Satisfaction, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Becoming Vajrasattva: The Tantric Path of Purification, by Lama Yeshe

The Bliss of Inner Fire, by Lama Yeshe

Becoming the Compassion Buddha, by Lama Yeshe

Ultimate Healing, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Dear Lama Zopa, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

How to Be Happy, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Wholesome Fear, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche with Kathleen McDonald

When the Chocolate Runs Out, by Lama Yeshe

How to Enjoy Death, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Mahamudra, by Lama Yeshe

The Four Noble Truths, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Bodhichitta, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

The Six Perfections, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Patience, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

About Lama Yeshe: *Reincarnation: The Boy Lama*, by Vicki Mackenzie

About Lama Zopa Rinpoche: *The Lawudo Lama*, by Jamyang Wangmo

For more information go to wisdomexperience.org.

TRANSCRIPTS, PRACTICES AND OTHER MATERIALS

Go to LamaYeshe.com and fpmt.org.

VIDEO OF LAMA YESHE AND LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

Go to youtube.com/user/LamaYeshe or youtube.com/user/fpmtinc.

WHAT TO DO WITH DHARMA TEACHINGS

The Buddhadharma is the true source of happiness for all sentient beings. Books like this show you how to put the teachings into practice and integrate them into your life, whereby you get the happiness you seek. Therefore, anything containing Dharma teachings, the names of your teachers or holy images is more precious than other material objects and should be treated with respect. To avoid creating the karma of not meeting the Dharma again in future lives, please do not put books (or other holy objects) on the floor or underneath other stuff, step over or sit upon them, or use them for mundane purposes such as propping up wobbly chairs or tables. They should be kept in a clean, high place, separate from worldly writings, and wrapped in cloth when being carried around. These are but a few considerations.

Should you need to get rid of Dharma materials, they should not be thrown in the rubbish but burned in a special way. Briefly: do not incinerate such materials with other trash, but alone, and as they burn, recite the mantra OM AH HUM. As the smoke rises, visualize that it pervades all of space, carrying the essence of the Dharma to all sentient beings in the six samsaric realms, purifying their minds, alleviating their suffering, and bringing them all happiness, up to and including enlightenment. Some people might find this practice a bit unusual, but it is given according to tradition. Thank you very much.

DEDICATION

Through the merit created by preparing, reading, thinking about and sharing this book with others, may all teachers of the Dharma live long and healthy lives, may the Dharma spread throughout the infinite reaches of space, and may all sentient beings quickly attain enlightenment.

In whichever realm, country, area or place this book may be, may there be no war, drought, famine, disease, injury, disharmony or unhappiness, may there be only great prosperity, may everything needed be easily obtained, and may all be guided by only perfectly qualified Dharma teachers, enjoy the happiness of Dharma, have love and compassion for all sentient beings, and only benefit and never harm each other.

LAMA THUBTEN YESHE was born in Tibet in 1935. At the age of six, he entered Sera Monastery, where he studied until 1959, when the Chinese invasion forced him into exile in India. In 1967 he and Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche went to Nepal, where they established the renowned Kopan Monastery. In 1974 the Lamas began teaching in the West and created a worldwide network of Buddhist centers—the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition. After an intense decade of imparting a wide variety of incredible teachings and establishing one FPMT activity after another, Lama Yeshe passed away in 1984. He was reborn in Spain in 1985.

LAMA THUBTEN ZOPA RINPOCHE was born in Thangme, Nepal, in 1945. At the age of three he was recognized as the reincarnation of the Lawudo Lama. From 1956 to 1959 he studied at Domo Monastery in Tibet. He then fled Chinese oppression in Tibet and continued his study and practice in Tibetan refugee camps in India, where he met Lama Yeshe (1935–1984), who became his principal teacher. In 1969 the Lamas began teaching Buddhism to Westerners at their Kopan Monastery, Kathmandu, Nepal, and in 1974 began traveling the world to spread the Dharma. In 1975 they founded the FPMT, an international Buddhist organization that now numbers more than 160 centers and related activities in some 40 countries worldwide.

ALISON MURDOCH first encountered Tibetan Buddhism at Kopan Monastery in Nepal in 1987 and has worked for the FPMT almost continuously since then, including as director of Jamyang Buddhist Centre London, director of the Foundation for Developing Compassion and Wisdom, and as a board member of FPMT Inc. She led on the creation of the Universal Education publication, app and study program *16 Guidelines for Life*, and has been a regular Buddhist contributor to BBC Radio. Alison and her husband Simon live in Somerset, UK, where they run The Good Heart, a local center dedicated to exploring kindness.

SANDRA SMITH, BCmn, met Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche in New Zealand in 1975, and joined the community at Chenrezig Institute in Queensland, Australia, later that year. Sandra was director of Chenrezig Institute from 2004–06 and FPMT Australia's national coordinator and tour coordinator from 2007–08. She compiled and edited children's booklets for FPMT, including *Meditations for Children* and *Plays for Children*, and has written numerous feature articles for Australian publications. Sandra commenced work as a web and general editor for Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive in 2009 and manages Lama Zopa Rinpoche's Online Advice Book at LamaYeshe.com.