

**TIBETAN BUDDHISM CENTER FOR WORLD PEACE**  
San Antonio, Texas

**Key Practices of the Path:**

**A Condensed Lam Rim Overview for Western Students and Practitioners**

**3. Developing Our Motivation for Practice**

**The Three Types of Persons and the Three Scopes of the Lam Rim**

The following is based on teachings by the Tibetan master Tsongkhapa from *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment (Lam Rim Chen Mo)* and the renowned Tibetan teacher Pabongka Rinpoche from *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, as well as teachings given by Ven. Thubten Chodron, and Ven. Robina Courtin. Prepared and compiled by Christopher Moroney

We are studying and meditating on a condensed overview of the gradual stages of the path to enlightenment, or *Lam Rim* topics, that were introduced to Tibet in the 11th century by the Indian Buddhist master Atisha, and further developed in the 14th century by the great Tibetan monk, philosopher, and Tantric yogi, Tsongkhapa.

As we first discussed previously, the root of the entire path is the guru-student relationship, which is the foundation of all the good spiritual qualities we are capable of developing. If we don't cultivate a good relationship with a spiritual teacher and don't properly rely on that teacher, our progress on the path will be slow and difficult, riddled with wrong views and misconceptions. Secondly, we discussed how to prepare the mind for meditation on the topics of the *Lam Rim* with the Six Preparatory Practices, which include the essential daily practices of taking refuge and developing bodhicitta, and engaging in the seven-limb practice: 1) prostration, 2) offering, 3) confessing and purifying our negative actions, 4) rejoicing in our own and others' merits, 5) requesting our gurus and the buddhas to remain until cyclic existence ends, 6) petitioning them to continue teaching the Dharma, and 7) dedicating the merit generated by ourselves and others for the benefit of all sentient beings.

In this session we're focusing on developing our motivation for practicing. When we set out on a spiritual path it's important to be clear about what is motivating us to do so. Are we looking for happiness in this life only? Are we looking for happiness in our future lives or an afterlife? Are we looking to get out of the whole repetitive and dissatisfying cycle of birth, aging, sickness, and death? Are we aspiring for complete enlightenment so we can benefit all living beings? Our motivation will determine the path we take and its outcome.

Atisha and Tsongkhapa talk about three types of persons with three different motivations based on their capacity. Among the persons of initial capacity, there are actually two types—those who are intent on achieving happiness in this lifetime only and those who are intent on achieving happiness in future lifetimes within cyclic existence. However, in the context of the three scopes of the *Lam Rim*, we are speaking of the latter, who do not work very much on behalf of this lifetime, but earnestly strive to cultivate the causes for attaining a fortunate rebirth in cyclic existence as either a human, or as a being with greater attributes and powers in higher realms of existence, such as the god or demigod realm.

Persons of intermediate capacity develop disillusionment with the continual repetitive cycle of birth and death in cyclic existence that is characterized by ego self-grasping, clinging desire, temporary happiness, dissatisfaction, anxiety, delusion, and suffering, and therefore make their goal their own liberation from cyclic existence. The achievement of this goal results in what is called solitary *nirvana*, or cessation. In Mahayana Buddhism this refers to a realization of selflessness and emptiness, marking the end of rebirth by eradicating the poisonous ignorance, attachment, and aversion that keep the process of rebirth going.

Persons of great capacity, under the influence of great compassion, make the omniscience of enlightened buddhahood their goal in order to bring an end to all the sufferings of all living beings.

### **The entire path to enlightenment is included within the paths of the three types of persons**

The stages of the path for the person of great capacity also completely encompass the paths for both the persons of initial and intermediate capacities. These two paths of initial and intermediate capacity are parts, or branches of the Mahayana path to enlightenment. In this instance teachers lead us neither to the path for persons of initial capacity, who make their goal nothing more than the transient happiness of life and death in cyclic existence, nor to the persons of intermediate capacity, who make their goal nothing more than liberation from cyclic existence for their own sake. Instead, they take some of the paths that are common to these two types of persons and make them prerequisites for leading us to the path for persons of great capacity. In that way they make them part of the training in the path for persons of great capacity. The motivation and capacity of these three types of persons correspond to the three scopes of the *Lam Rim*, or gradual path: initial, intermediate, and great. The extent to which we train our minds in these three scopes determines how much of the initial, intermediate, or great essence we will eventually extract. Venerable Robina Courtin gives an appropriate current-day analogy for this kind of training in a gradual path that we can easily understand. If we desire to get our post-graduate degree and the benefits that can come from it, we must first proceed through the graded or gradual path of education: grade school, middle school, high school, then university and post-graduate levels.

If we want to achieve buddhahood—the utter uprooting of all afflictive emotions and the development to perfection of all positive qualities, we must first develop realizations into the earlier sections of the *Lam Rim*; if we don't we won't develop realizations into the later parts. We simply can't develop realizations into such higher parts of the path as great compassion and wisdom—as much as we'd like to because it sounds so appealing—unless and until we've first achieved the lower parts such as ethical discipline and renunciation—as boring and dreary as that may sound to us right now. Yet, how many of us can say that we've completely achieved ethical discipline or renunciation, or even know precisely what they refer to? We're talking about training the mind in the stages of the path that are *shared* with the initial and intermediate scopes; we don't mean training the mind in the actual initial and intermediate parts of the path.

As an example, suppose there are three people from San Antonio traveling west on IH-10: one is going to Los Angeles, one to Phoenix, and one to El Paso. The first person wants to go to Los Angeles, but must share the road part of the way with the other two. The three travelers have different goals in mind: two of them intend to stop in either Phoenix or El Paso, and the first intends to continue on to Los Angeles. Even though the first person makes stops in El Paso and Phoenix, from the beginning of the trip that person's focus is always on the goal of getting to Los Angeles.

Similarly, in the initial- and intermediate-scope sections of the *Lam Rim*, we must focus on achieving buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings. Developing bodhicitta—the altruistic intention to attain buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings—is the actual practice; the initial- and intermediate-scope parts of the path are preliminaries to developing bodhicitta—like making stops in El Paso and Phoenix on the way to Los Angeles.

Some of us may be wondering, “If that's the case wouldn't it be quicker and more efficient to just teach the great scope from the beginning—like taking a jet to Los Angeles instead of driving the whole way? Are the so-called initial and intermediate scopes really necessary?”

There are two reasons for discussing all three scopes. Firstly, there are many of us who cannot train our minds in the great scope initially, so we need to practice in stages through the initial and intermediate scopes. This approach is more beneficial for those of us with good, mediocre, or inferior minds. Now, none of us like to think that we may have mediocre or inferior minds, and most of us like to think that our minds are at least better than just good, but we're not simply talking about mere intellectual prowess here. The Buddha's teachings in the great scope, such as great compassion and the higher secret tantric practices, sound very appealing to our self-grasping egos' penchant for exclusivity and being the best. But these higher teachings require a mind that is so flexible, so discriminating, and so insightful that it can completely cut through the concretized appearance of reality that we now experience and take for granted. Some of the world's most accomplished scientific and philosophical minds find these higher teachings of

the Buddha both challenging and intriguing when they investigate them seriously. The second reason for discussing all three scopes is that without some familiarity with the earlier parts of the path, we will have absolutely no renunciation at all in our mindstreams toward cyclic existence and ego self-grasping, so we need to defeat any egoistic pride we may have about being a Mahayana/Great Vehicle Buddhist or a practitioner of the highest secret tantras.

According to Lama Tsongkhapa, the entrance to the Mahayana, or Great Vehicle, is solely the awakened mind of bodhicitta. Once this spirit of bodhicitta is produced in your mind-stream, it is as Shantideva says in his *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*:

The moment helpless beings, bound in the prison of cyclic existence,  
Develop this spirit of enlightenment [bodhicitta]  
They are called “children of the *sugatas* [buddhas]”...

We enter the Mahayana when we develop bodhicitta. This sets us on the path of a bodhisattva, or “awakened being” (*bodhi* = awake; *satvva* = being). If we abandon our aspiration and intention to become a buddha for the benefit of all sentient beings, we force ourselves to leave the company of Mahayana practitioners and the bodhisattva path.

Therefore, those of us who wish to enter the Mahayana path as laid out in the *Lam Rim* must develop bodhicitta through our sustained and repeated efforts. The highest authoritative texts that teach the stages of the bodhisattva path are Shantideva’s *Compendium of Trainings* and *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*. Shantideva states that you first need to meditate on the benefits of developing bodhicitta. Then you intensify and strengthen your enthusiasm about these benefits from the depths of your heart. He says this must be accompanied with practicing the seven limbs of prostration, offering, confession/purification, rejoicing, requesting, petitioning, and dedication, along with the practice of taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

The previous topic in this series of *Key Practices of the Path*, “Preparing the Mind for Meditation: The Six Preparatory Practices in Guided Meditation Form” is intended to help shape our minds precisely for this purpose. Tsongkhapa states that the methods of training presented in these six preparatory practices are prerequisites for the development of bodhicitta in the context of the *Lam Rim* practices for the person of great capacity.

In *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, Pabongka Rinpoche says that to develop bodhicitta, which is the actual practice, we need to develop such great compassion that we simply cannot bear others being tormented by suffering—whether they’re human, non-human, friend, foe, or stranger. This is the kind of compassion that arises by training in the great-scope. But in order to develop this great compassion, we must know exactly how we ourselves are afflicted by suffering. And we must understand that the whole of samsara, or cyclic existence, is by nature suffering. This understanding comes from training in the intermediate-scope. But first we must fear the karmic results of our negative actions that cause us to be reborn in the lower realms of cyclic existence, for without this fear we will have no renunciation of temporary human happiness in cyclic existence or the temporary happiness of higher realms in cyclic existence. This motivation and understanding comes through training in the initial scope. We must therefore train our minds in the initial- and intermediate-scope parts of the path in order to have realizations in the great-scope. Pabongka Rinpoche says this kind of training is like constructing the foundations and wall-supports of a house.

Venerable Thubten Chodron teaches that it’s important to understand these three levels of motivation because within them is contained all the teachings of the Buddha. If we understand these three levels of motivation and the different practices that are associated with them, then whenever we hear any teaching by any teacher of any tradition, we’ll know where it fits into the gradual path. This removes a lot of the confusion we often have in practicing the dharma.

Ven. Thubten says these three levels of motivation progressively expand our minds. Often we’re initially motivated to come to Buddhist teachings because we have some sort of problem, or we’re unhappy, or we feel like there must be something more that will help us quickly solve whatever problems

we're trying to deal with. This initial motivation is basically concerned with our own happiness now, because most of us want to be happy now. We're not thinking we want to be happy five-, or ten-, or a thousand lifetimes from now. It is nice if other people are happy, but we usually come to a Buddhist teaching because we're looking to be happy immediately. That's our basic motivation.

### **Level 1: Training our mind in the stages in common with a person of initial motivation**

As we start practicing the initial-scope parts of the path we begin to expand that motivation. We begin to look ahead in our life, and realize that this human life of ours is impermanent—it will come to an end. Death is certain, it's inevitable, it's something that will definitely come. We start thinking about impermanence and what is going to happen to us after we die. According to the Buddha, death is not the end of our existence. There is something that continues. What happens to us at that point? We begin to become concerned about dying peacefully and making a smooth transition to a fortunate rebirth as a human, in which we can continue to practice the Dharma. We don't want to be born as a dog or cat, or another kind of being that lacks the motivation for practice, or isn't capable of comprehending the Buddha's teachings. The *method* for doing this is to practice ethical discipline and observe the laws of karma. We start by abandoning destructive, non-virtuous actions and putting our energy into constructive, virtuous actions, because we're beginning to understand that our actions of body, speech, and mind create the causes for who we are and what we are going to become

### **Level 2: Training our mind in the stages in common with a person of intermediate motivation**

When we start practicing the intermediate-scope parts of the path we begin to understand that even though we may create the causes for a fortunate human rebirth in cyclic existence, we're still going to have problems, we're still going to get old and sick and die all over again. We're still going to be confused, get angry, have attachment and jealousy, and we're still not going to get everything we want. If we're still going to have all these difficulties, what's the point in doing it over and over? So, out of compassion for ourselves we turn away from and renounce having the kind of life that's caught up in a recurring cyclic of death and rebirth under the control of delusion and karma, and fraught with suffering—no matter what realm of cyclic existence we're born into. We generate the determination to be free from all of it. We aspire for liberation from cyclic existence. The result of liberation is nirvana, which is the cessation of being under the control of our ignorance, afflictive emotions and karma, and all the consequences of having to experience the inevitable suffering of compulsive and continual rebirths in cyclic existence. We expand our motivation from having a fortunate human rebirth in cyclic existence to achieving liberation from cyclic existence and reaching the state of nirvana for ourselves. The *method* to attain that is called the three higher trainings: the higher training in ethics, which we already started to practice in the initial scope; the higher training in concentration, which enables us to control our mind and subdue our gross desires; and the higher training in wisdom, which culminates in our experiencing a direct, non-conceptual realization of emptiness and the dependently arising nature of reality. This completely removes the ignorance that is at the root of all our afflictive emotions and destructive karma.

### **Level 3: Training our mind in the stages in common with a person of great motivation**

In the second level of motivation, we clearly see the situation we've become trapped in through the force of our own ignorance and karma, and we develop compassion for ourselves. Because of this great self compassion we make the determination to be free from cyclic existence forever.

With the third and highest level of motivation, we expand our motivation again. Instead of being happy with the self-complacent peaceful state of our own liberation, we become keenly aware that we exist within a dependently arising system of countless interacting consciousnesses and forms under the influence of related forces in an interdependent, interconnected, infinite universal experience. We do not exist separately and independently from others, and they do not exist separately and independently from us. Throughout beginning-less time we have been incredibly dependent on them, and they have been unbelievably kind and generous to us. Each one of them wants happiness just as we do, and they want to

avoid suffering as much as we do. To just pursue our own spiritual path with the attitude of bettering our own rebirth or attaining our own liberation and solitary nirvana simply doesn't make sense in light of the dependently arising nature of all existing consciousnesses and forms.

Having recognized our own suffering and its causes we now recognize others' suffering and its causes. Having understood the depth of our own experience of suffering we now understand the depth of others' experience of suffering. Having generated great compassion for ourselves we are now able to generate great compassion for others. Our awareness of others' suffering and distress combined with a desire to alleviate it isn't superficial and unstable because it is firmly grounded in our own experience. Our love and compassion for all others is now actual, stable, sustainable, and courageous.

Now we generate the altruistic intention of the third level of motivation—wanting others to be free from all suffering and confusion. We develop a very strong altruistic intention to become a buddha so that we'll be best able to lead others to lasting happiness. The *method* we practice to do that is to engage in the six preparatory practices, which include taking refuge in the three jewels (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha) and cultivating the arising of bodhicitta through the seven-limb practice, taking bodhisattva vows received from a qualified spiritual teacher, and entering the bodhisattva path by practicing the six *paramitas* or in English, the six perfections (sometimes translated as the six far-reaching attitudes). These six are: generosity, ethical discipline, patience, joyous/enthusiastic effort, meditative concentration, and wisdom. After we've perfected these six qualities in ourselves, the *method* we use to achieve complete enlightenment or buddhahood is the path of tantra.

We can see as we look at these three levels of practice according to the three levels of motivation that all the teachings of the Buddha are contained within them. All the teachings of all the different Buddhist traditions are contained within this framework of the three levels of persons and their motivation, and the methods that one practices to attain the goals that one is aspiring for at each level of motivation.

When we understand this we will never criticize any other Buddhist traditions. We will appreciate that different people have different levels of spiritual aspiration at any given moment. We might have one kind of aspiration. Our friend might have another. That's alright. We understand that the process of the Buddhist path is sequential and expansive.

As we practice the *Lam Rim* topics sequentially, we keep the final higher practices as our aspiration and goal. This is why we meditate on a different *Lam Rim* subject each day if possible, starting at the beginning—relying on the guru, the precious human rebirth, death and impermanence, unfortunate rebirths, taking refuge, karma, the four noble truths, how to free ourselves from suffering, equanimity, developing love and compassion, etc. We do each meditation in sequence, and then come back and start again. We keep doing these in a cyclical manner.

This can be very helpful. We'll have an overall view because we've done a little bit of meditation on all of the stages. We can see how they fit together. We can also see that the more we understand the end practices, when we come back to meditating on the earlier practices—for example the importance of having a spiritual teacher, or having a precious human life—the better we'll understand them. The more we understand the beginning practices, the more it helps build the foundation for the later ones. The more we understand the later ones, the more it enriches our understanding of the beginning ones.

Of course this takes time. We need to put some effort into thinking about all of these *Lam Rim* topics. Nobody else can do it for us. We have to put in the effort to familiarize ourselves with them. All the highly realized beings attained their realizations on the basis of having a precious human life. We have a precious human life right now, as well. The only difference between us and them is that they put in sustained effort. It's basically a matter of putting our energy into it. We do that for worldly things. We put a lot of energy into our worldly goals and aspirations. If we have the energy for that, certainly we can do

the same for spiritual things. Because when we put our energy into the benefits we can derive from worldly things, all that benefit disappears when we die. But if we put that same effort into our spiritual practice, the benefit doesn't disappear when we die; it continues on.

As Geshe Nima wrote in his recent message to all of us, "My heartfelt request: Please study well as well as practice well. Study only is not enough if we need changes in our mind. If study and practice can go together on a daily basis, the more hope there is to change our physical behavior as well as our way of thinking, which support us in becoming convinced of the dharma's values for this life and all the lifetimes to come until Buddhahood."