

# TIBETAN BUDDHISM CENTER FOR WORLD PEACE

San Antonio, Texas

## Key Practices of the Path:

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

#### The Initial Scope—Meditation 1, Part 1:

#### “What Makes a Human Life Precious?”

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 at Dharma Friendship Foundation in Seattle, Washington. Prepared and compiled by Christopher Moroney.

*“Understanding that the precious freedom of this rebirth is found only once, is greatly meaningful, and is difficult to find again, please bless me to generate the mind that unceasingly, day and night, takes its essence.”*

—Lama Tsongkhapa, from “The Foundation of All Good Qualities”

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. These *Lam Rim* meditation practices were not readily available to spiritual practitioners in the west until the mid-20th century.

As was previously explained, according to Lama Tsongkhapa the foundation of the path is “The Guru-Student Relationship”, which if cultivated properly will assure that our progress is gradual, steady, and free of wrong views and misconceptions.

Next, the Six Preparatory Practices were presented in guided meditation form for the purpose of “Preparing the Mind for Meditation” on the topics of the *Lam Rim*. Tsongkhapa states that the methods of training presented in the Six Preparatory Practices are prerequisites for the development of bodhicitta in a person of great capacity who aspires to achieve complete enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Then we talked about “Developing Our Motivation for Practice” in the context of three types of persons with three different motivations based on their capacity, and how they correspond to the three scopes of the *Lam Rim*.

A person of initial capacity makes their goal a fortunate rebirth within cyclic existence. The *method* for achieving this in the initial-scope of the *Lam Rim* is to practice ethical discipline and observe the laws of karma.

A person of intermediate capacity, due to self compassion, makes their goal liberation from cyclic existence for their own sake. The *method* for achieving this in the intermediate-scope of the *Lam Rim* is the Three Higher Trainings: the higher training in ethics, the higher training in meditative concentration, and the higher training in wisdom realizing emptiness.

A person of great capacity, due to the development of great compassion, makes their goal enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. The *method* for achieving this in the great-scope of the *Lam Rim* is taking refuge in the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha), cultivating the arising of bodhicitta, taking bodhisattva vows received from a qualified spiritual teacher, and entering the bodhisattva path through the practice of 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 completely perfected these six qualities of the

bodhisattva path in ourselves, the final *method* we use to achieve enlightenment, or buddhahood, is the path of tantra.

Now we move on to the first meditation topic in the initial-scope of the *Lam Rim*: “The Precious Human Life.” Pabongka Rinpoche calls this topic, “The Optimum Human Rebirth” and Lama Tsongkhapa uses the title, “A Human Life of Leisure and Opportunity.” Starting with this topic, the *Lam Rim* stages are presented through which the guru leads the disciple who properly relies on the teacher as previously explained.

### **What makes a human life precious?**

Just like other human beings in this world, our lives are a mixture of joys, sorrows, and challenges. What makes an ordinary human existence a precious one? This first meditation topic of the initial-scope is designed to shake us out of a deeply ingrained tendency we have to take our current situation for granted. It wakes us up to the incredible opportunity right here and now for positive transformation. As Pabongka Rinpoche says, we find nothing wrong with having our mouths open all the time indulging in idle chatter and gossip—that’s because we aren’t thinking about the great benefits and the rarity of this precious human life. Thinking about these things is a strong stimulus for us to practice Dharma.

First of all we have to recognize what a precious human life is, then talk about its purpose, what it can be used for, how it can be meaningful, and then check to see whether it is a rare opportunity and if it’s easy to come by again.

The standard way of teaching this is to talk about two main things: 1) the eight freedoms and 2) the ten endowments. The eight freedoms are the eight states we are free from being in, and the ten endowments are ten qualities that we have to check and see if we have. As we go through these we should think about them in terms of our own life to see if we have all eighteen of them or not. How can we get some of them? What can they be used for?

One of the difficulties with this first topic is that we’re not completely sure we believe in rebirth. We’re not sure if human beings can be reborn as other kinds of living beings. One of the big hindrances to thinking that we may have had other lives is we have such a concretized, solid view of who we are now. We’re so settled into, and attached to, the body we have right now that it’s hard for us to even imagine what it was like to be a baby—being so tiny and not being able to walk, peeing in our pants and having our diapers changed all the time. Or being a very old person, unable to get up and walk around, peeing in our pants and having our diapers changed all the time! We’re so concretized in our identity right now. That concretization is really a misrepresentation of who we are, because within the continuum of this human body, it’s been continually changing going from a baby to an old person. When we begin to really think about it we will realize that we’re quite capable of living in different kinds of bodies with different capabilities.

A second point about this meditation is that its purpose is not to make us feel proud. We’re not listing all our good qualities and good fortune in order to come to the conclusion that we’re somehow the best people in the world, superior to those who are less fortunate. The purpose of studying the Dharma is not to become more proud. The whole purpose is to recognize our good qualities and the opportunities we have right now in order to use those qualities wisely and beneficially. We have to be clear that by pointing out distinctions among people and among groups or even among religions, it doesn’t mean we’re criticizing one person or group or religion or placing them on different levels. It only means that things are different in relative ways. In one way, all sentient beings are equal—we all have a consciousness that holds the potential for complete enlightenment. Relatively speaking, an animal is different from a human being. They’re both equal in that they are sentient beings, wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. But an animal can’t do many of the things a human can, and a human can’t do many of the things an animal can. This is quite clear when we begin to analyze it.

What we’re doing with this meditation is making relative distinctions about relative reality and then trying to develop a constructive way of viewing those distinctions. The purpose of meditating on our

precious human life is to make us aware of the opportunities and good qualities that we have going for us. Many of us spend our lives taking for granted all of our opportunities and good qualities, and instead spend our time focusing on all the things that don't seem to be going right in our lives. This meditation is designed to help us rebalance how we're looking at our life. By noticing all the good things, it makes us realize that yes, we may have some difficulties, but compared to what we have going for us from a larger perspective, our difficulties aren't as serious as we might think.

### **The eight freedoms**

Not every human life is a precious one. We first have to identify what a precious human life is before we can even want to extract the benefits from it. As Pabongka Rinpoche says, "the bricks of your hearth may be made of gold, but if you don't know it, you'll still be a poor person." So from the beginning we need to identify the unfavorable states for Dharma practice that we're currently free from. These are called the eight freedoms. Four are freedoms from non-human states where there's no chance to practice the Dharma, and four are freedoms from human states where there's no chance to practice Dharma. Nagarjuna, the great Indian Mahayana Buddhist scholar and founder of the highest Madhyamaka school of Buddhist philosophical tenets, mentions these eight unfavorable states for Dharma practice in his *Letter to a Friend*:

Upholding wrong views, being an animal,  
Hungry ghost, or being born in hell,  
Being without a buddha's teachings,  
Being born in a remote place as a barbarian,  
As an idiot or mute, or as a long-lived god:  
Any of these rebirths is one of the eight faulty unfavorable states.  
Because you have gained a favorable state free of these,  
Strive to block your future rebirths.

Now, before we go any further here, we should remind ourselves that Nagarjuna is considered to be one of the greatest thinkers in Asian history. His exposition of the Buddha's most profound teachings on emptiness is unparalleled to this day, pored over and studied by Buddhist and non-Buddhist scholars alike. So before we automatically go to our knee-jerk reactions of, "Hey, wait a minute! Yes, I may have access to the teachings of a buddha, but I don't believe in hell, I don't believe in long-lived gods, I don't believe in ghosts—what's a *hungry* ghost? I love animals—what's wrong with being an animal? And isn't it a little unenlightened to be calling other people barbarians, idiots, and mutes?"—let's take a closer look at Nagarjuna's statement.

### **The four freedoms from unfavorable *non-human* states**

#### **1. Hell beings**

So let's start with hell beings. Many of us, due to our past religious or cultural conditioning, think of hell as some kind of awful, infernal place that's supposed to concretely exist out there somewhere in some terrible realm that's independent of our state of mind, where very naughty people go after they die to be punished by being burned, tortured, poked at, frozen, chopped up, smashed, and reassembled so they can go through the whole process all over again, ad infinitum.

Many of us have written this concept off as manipulative mind control of the masses by an authoritative religious hierarchy. And we may not be 100% wrong about that... However, we may not be 100% right, either. According to the Buddha, all experience consists of a state of mind or conscious awareness combined with an appearance of form that corresponds to that state of mind or conscious awareness. We don't have to wait until we've died and gone to some other realm to experience the kind of pain and suffering that we would call hellish. Recall a time in your life when you were very depressed, or hostile

and angry, or very fearful and paranoid. What was it like to be in that state of mind? Do you remember how painful that was? That mental state can become so strong and intense that it creates *your* experience of *your* entire environment. Someone could simply smile at you and say, “Hey, how are you?” and you’d think they have mal-intent or want to harm you. That’s how insane we can get, because our projection on our external environment is so strong it becomes our whole experience.

Or imagine having an extremely severe neurological or cancerous disease where your joints, nerves, organs, muscles, and skin are hurting, churning in pain all the time and you have no relief from it. Combined with that you have excruciating mental pain so that your entire experience from morning to night is nothing but pain with no break. Wouldn’t we call that hell? And in that kind of physical and mental state would we be able to practice the Dharma?

At this very moment right on this planet alone, there are millions of animals and people, from the tiniest insects to the largest mammals, from the smallest of children to the very elderly, who are suffering a hellish existence of unimaginable pain in unimaginably horrible circumstances. At this very moment we are not among them—we’re free from that kind of existence, whether it’s here in the human realm of existence or some kind of hell realm. This should be a cause for great humility and great compassion in us. And it should be a cause for us to not waste the precious opportunity we have right now for our spiritual development, before it passes us by.

## **2. Hungry ghosts**

What about hungry ghosts? What are they? Again, this is a type of life experience that is a manifestation of a state of mind. It is a life that experiences continual frustration and clinging. Think of a time in your life when you felt tremendously insecure and you clung on to whatever was around you, whether it was a person, or an object, or a substance, or a situation in your life. Or think of a time when you’ve been really obsessed with something, really desired something, where you can’t get your mind off of that thing, and the frustration that comes from not getting the thing that you want. You never feel secure enough, you never have enough, and as hard as you try, you can never find any lasting satisfaction. Can you remember anything like that in your life?

Now imagine that mental state appears to you as your body and your environment so that your whole life, from the time you’re born to the time you die, is just grasping and clinging and frustration and running from one thing to the next trying to get something that’s going to make you happy. This is the life that exists in the realm of a hungry ghost. This is also the life of a severe addict, who has become nothing more than a hollow, empty shell of a being, constantly searching for their next fix. There is no chance, no time, and no inclination to practice the Dharma. Under certain conditions and circumstances any one of us could experience this type of downfall. Many of us personally know others who are caught up in an existence similar to this, and we have not been able to effectively help them. At the present moment, we’re free from experiencing this unfavorable state of being. We should use that freedom to practice the Dharma so we can learn to be of benefit to others who suffer in this way.

## **3. Animals**

A rebirth as an animal is unfavorable for Dharma practice because of an animal’s inability to comprehend the Buddha’s teachings. This is reality, it’s not a criticism. We all love our dogs and cats and chickens and fish, but they can’t understand a word of Dharma. There is a difference between the physical and mental states of an animal and a human being. Animals’ instincts are phenomenal, but an animal’s cognitive ability is more limited than a human’s. It’s very difficult to engage in any kind of spiritual practice as an animal, or to observe the law of cause and effect and make preparations for future lives and purify past lives’ karma. Once we shift our attention from the pampered realm of the animals who are our pets and observe the life of an animal in the wild we can see just how difficult an animal’s life can be. They are constantly in danger of being attacked and eaten alive by predators, constantly searching for food and water, having to find shelter, dealing with the extremes of weather, battling disease, being

poisoned, or being hunted and killed. Most farmed animals are raised in factory farms and killed in a slaughterhouse—which can be brutal and terrifying. The vast majority of animals in the world only experience their particular forms of suffering and their particular forms of respite from suffering. Except in rare cases, it's very difficult for an animal to generate enough positive karma to be reborn into a higher level of existence where they can engage in a spiritual path and practice the Dharma. Though many of us love animals and have a sense of closeness to them and compassion for their suffering, as humans we are currently free from the state of actually being an animal with no chance to practice the Dharma. We shouldn't take this for granted. The opportunity to meet with the Buddha's teachings and to practice them may not always be available to us. Now is the time to take advantage of such a rare opportunity.

#### **4. Long-lived gods and celestial beings**

The fourth non-human state with no chance to practice the Dharma that we're presently free from is a so-called long-lived god or celestial being.

Beings that are born in what are called the form and formless realms have attained one of the greatest karmic results one can achieve in cyclic existence—like being at the very top of a great Ferris wheel. Yet when beings are born in these realms they feel, “I have been reborn a god,” and after many great eons when they finally leave the rebirth they feel, “I am dying and am leaving this rebirth as a god.” The rest of the time they are engrossed in such single-pointed concentration that they have inactive minds and mental processes. It is like being asleep—they waste their whole rebirth in this utterly meaningless way. When they die, there is no direction for them to go but down.

The gods and demi-gods in the lower celestial realms have some great instincts for virtue—which is why they were reborn there in the first place—but, except for a few of them, they normally spend their whole time engrossed in pleasure and so will receive no Dharma. In these realms there is everything you could possibly want in terms of whatever it is you like; it's there in abundance, and you just enjoy it all the time. Imagine what it would be like to be so pampered, so spoiled, that everything you want, you get. Imagine being completely filled with attachment to sense pleasures. Would you practice the Dharma? This is the disadvantage of being born in a celestial realm. You go through your whole life just enjoying and enjoying, and when you die, what happens? Once you get to the top of the Ferris wheel and consume all of that good karma, there's only one way to go. You're born into a life of a lot more misery, and you're born there without having made any preparation for it, because you spent your whole life just enjoying yourself.

We should rejoice that we're free from being reborn in a god realm, because if we're serious about attaining enlightenment, situations of extreme pleasure are just as disadvantageous as situations of extreme pain. In our ordinary state of mind, we can't cope with too much of either. We get totally overwhelmed.

#### **The four freedoms from unfavorable *human* states**

##### **5. Being born in a remote place as a barbarian**

This means we have not been born in an uncivilized place among savages, or in a place where religion is outlawed. Say you're born in a place where there's human sacrifice, or animal sacrifice. This still exists in our world. It's going to be difficult to practice the Dharma because there won't be any teachers around and you're going to come to hold the views of your surrounding culture. You're going to engage in animal sacrifice or human sacrifice. It will be very difficult to put your mind in a virtuous state when you're born into that kind of place.

Or imagine being born in a country where religion is outlawed, like Tibet at the time of the Chinese communist takeover. Everyone in the monasteries were completely defrocked. They made monks and nuns have sex in public, they made them collect feces, and if they didn't collect enough feces, they would beat them. If they were caught even moving their mouths saying prayers, they were beaten. They were imprisoned, raped, and their orifices tortured with cattle prods. Would it be difficult or easy to practice the

Dharma in a place where religion was outlawed like that? Could you have teachings? Could you learn and practice?

So we're very fortunate to be born in a place where there is religious freedom right now. It doesn't mean that everybody who's born in a place where there is no religious freedom is bad, or that everyone who's born in an uncivilized place is bad. It means that in those situations there is no freedom to study and practice the Dharma because the external conditions around you won't allow it. We're very fortunate now not to be experiencing that. We have a lot of freedom and a lot of capability. We should take advantage of that while we have it.

### **6. Being without a buddha's teachings**

We're also free from being born in a place where the Buddha's teachings are unavailable and where a buddha hasn't appeared and taught. It's quite possible that there are many places in the universe that have life and sentient beings—other planets, other kinds of societies—that haven't had the fortune of having a buddha come and teach the Dharma. If a buddha hasn't come and explained the whole path to enlightenment, then there's no opportunity to practice it. If there are no teachers to explain the methods of how to develop bodhicitta, or how to decrease your attachment and anger and develop your wisdom, then it will be impossible to learn them. So we have been very fortunate in our life to be born into a situation where the Buddha has appeared on this earth and has given teachings and that those teachings still exist.

### **7. Being an idiot or mute**

We're free from being born with severe mental or physical challenges that make the study and practice of the Dharma extremely difficult or even impossible. This is not a criticism of those who are severely challenged mentally or physically. It's just saying that there is a difference or distinction between having the full use of one's brain and the body's sense faculties and not having the full use of them. If we are born with a defective or unclear mind, or with defective speech and sense faculties, we will either not understand the real purpose behind the Dharma or only go through the motions and not practice properly. We're free from those disadvantages. It's something to be grateful for and we should use our abilities in a very constructive way.

### **8. Upholding wrong views**

Being a person with wrong views is the greatest hindrance to taking up the Dharma—that is why Nagarjuna's *Letter* puts this at the top of the list. An example of upholding wrong views would be to stubbornly and tenaciously assert that it's impossible to become enlightened, or that karma doesn't exist, or that all phenomena exist independently and separately. Or we could uphold wrong ethical views, saying it's okay to kill, or lie, or steal, or sleep around. These wrong views could completely overwhelm our mind and make it extremely difficult for any altruistic thoughts of loving kindness, compassion, and wisdom to arise and take root. We're free of having such stubbornly held wrong views in our mind.

We should develop a feeling of joy that we are free from these eight unfavorable states for Dharma practice. If there were eight difficult but mundane worldly things to achieve, and we had achieved them all, we would be inclined to say: "What good fortune that I've achieved these things!" With something so much more important, are we not that much more fortunate still to have achieved these eight freedoms that are so difficult to achieve? We have so much freedom and opportunity with us right now. We should remember this each day for the rest of our lives and *never* take it for granted!

In the next session, we'll talk about the ten endowments of a precious human life.