

~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 2:

“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, and teachings by Ven. Robina Courtin. Prepared and compiled by Christopher Moroney.

“Every day, think as you wake up: Today I am fortunate to have woken up, I am alive, I have a precious human life. I am not going to waste it.”

—His Holiness, the XIVth Dalai Lama

We are studying and meditating on the gradual stages of the path to enlightenment—or the initial-, intermediate-, and great-scopes of *Lam Rim* topics—that were introduced to Tibet by the Indian Buddhist master Atisha, and further developed by the great Tibetan monk and philosopher, Tsongkhapa. These three scopes of *Lam Rim* meditation practices were not readily available to spiritual practitioners in the west until the latter part of the 20th century.

The first meditation topic in the initial-scope of the *Lam Rim* is “What Makes a Human Life Precious?” (alternatively titled “The Optimum Human Rebirth” or “A Human Life of Leisure and Opportunity”). The purpose of this meditation is to help us recognize the rare opportunity that exists for us in terms of making significant spiritual progress on the path because of the fortunate human life we have right now. The purpose is to shake us out of our complacent view that takes our human life for granted—to stop us from wasting our lives by spending most of our time alternating between working to achieve some level of status or material comfort and compulsively indulging in sensory distractions. At best, this can only provide us with the temporary kind of pleasures that cyclic existence has to offer.

In the first part of this meditation topic we focused on the freedoms we currently have from eight kinds of existences that would hinder our progress on the spiritual path. Four of these 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.

In the process of familiarizing ourselves with this we have to make distinctions between different groups of sentient beings. This is not done in order to make us feel proud or superior to others. We make distinctions between being born as an animal and being born as a human; being born in a place where barbarous and merciless persecution occurs based on culture, gender, race, or religion, and being born in a place where that isn’t experienced; being born with severe mental and physical challenges, and being born without them; being born where the Buddha’s teachings are available, and being born where they’re not available; being born into a life of such status, privilege, and abundant sense pleasure that we have no interest in the Dharma, and being born into a reasonably balanced life where we can appreciate the value of the Dharma; being born into a life of incessant frustration, clinging, obsession and insecurity, and being born into a life that has a more balanced range of experiences; being born into a life that is a relentless living hell, and being born into a life that is a mixture of joys, sorrows, and challenges; and being born with a mind that persistently thinks everything exists independently and one’s personal actions don’t have consequences, and being born with a mind capable of comprehending that everything exists interdependently and one’s personal actions have consequences.

There's nothing wrong with making distinctions among things. The problem or difficulty that can occur in making distinctions is that we can become biased, or prejudiced, or judgmental. But we're not talking about good and bad, or superior and inferior here. We're trying to observe our own lives and ask the question, "If I was living in this kind of situation, would I be able to realize my innate buddha potential as well as if I was living in that kind of situation?"

Another issue that can arise for us with this meditation is that it's based on an assumption there are life forms other than human that our consciousness can embody, and that reincarnation exists. Many of us are not sure about reincarnation and have trouble believing in it. But the Buddha never said, "If you want to be a Buddhist, you must believe everything I'm telling you." What the Buddha did say is that we have to thoroughly investigate his teachings for ourselves and we definitely should not believe them with blind faith. What would be the point of that? It would be a bit like saying "I believe in gravity" or "I believe in mathematics" because we were told to, without having observed and experienced those things for ourselves. We don't have to *believe* in them. But we do have to engage in an observation of them in order to determine for ourselves if they exist as functioning things within our experience.

Ven. Robina Courtin suggests if we're uncertain about particular kinds of assumptions in Buddhism, that we take these assumptions on board tentatively like any good scientist would—as hypotheses. This way we can investigate the Buddha's teachings without completely committing to them, so that we can test their logical or observable consequences for ourselves.

Perhaps part of the reason some of us feel we're supposed to believe in the Buddha if we want to study and practice Buddhism, has to do with our social, cultural, and religious conditioning. An essential element in many of our world's religions is a belief in a creator god who is omniscient and omnipotent, who punishes and rewards. Some of us were brought up as adherents to some of these religions. It's not surprising that we would project onto Buddhism some of the deep-seated religious concepts we grew up with.

The Buddha is not a creator god. He is not a substitute for one. All of the Buddha's teachings come from his direct experience. It is up to us to look into the Buddha's teachings for ourselves and come to our own conclusions based on our own experience, observations, and logical inference. The Buddha is not a punisher or rewarder because the Buddha is not a creator. According to the Buddha, we're the boss.

Believing in the Buddha won't cause our enlightenment to happen, or liberate us from the poisonous results of our afflictive emotions. The Buddha's teachings instruct us, guide us, help and support us on the spiritual path, but we're the ones who have to walk it. At the end of the day—and at the time of our death—our own actions of body, speech, and mind will determine what we experience in accordance with the natural, observable laws of cause and effect. From the Buddhist point of view, the only punisher or rewarder that exists for us is our own karma—the active effects we experience as a result of the way we are thinking, how we use our speech, and the actions we engage in with our body. Ultimately, we're the only ones who can control that. So from that point of view, we actually are the boss.

The ten endowments of a precious human life

Now let's move on to the ten endowments of a precious human life. Ven. Thubten Chodron refers to these as the ten riches, and Lama Tsongkhapa calls them the ten aspects of opportunity. They are aspects of our human life that are conducive to practicing the Dharma. They're somewhat similar to the eight freedoms, but are viewed from a different perspective. Five of these endowments pertain to yourself personally, and five endowments pertain to others. According to the *Shravaka Levels* the five that pertain to yourself are:

Being human, being born in a central region, having complete sensory faculties,
Having reversible karma (not perverted by the heinous crimes), and having enduring faith

The five personal endowments

1. Being human

The first of the five endowments that pertain to yourself is being a human. This is seen as an endowment or opportunity because as human beings we have a balance of happiness and suffering. Our lives aren't completely miserable, but they're not completely great either. In terms of Dharma practice this is very good because it affords us the space in our psyche to observe our mind. If we are mainly experiencing suffering, sorrow, and anxiety in our life, we'll completely forget about the Dharma and be overwhelmed by our problems. Likewise, if we have an overabundance of sense pleasures and everything is going just great and we're happy-happy-happy all the time, we're not going to pay much attention to the Dharma. We'll be blinded by our own happiness and forget about death, we'll forget about all the suffering in the world. But because we're human beings with a human body, we have a balance of happiness and suffering. This is actually a good thing for Dharma practice—enough happiness to keep our life from being too difficult, and enough suffering to remind us not to become too complacent.

Additionally, we have the intelligence of a human. In general, having human intelligence is a good thing. It doesn't mean that everyone uses their human intelligence in positive and constructive ways. Sometimes human beings act very, very badly—much worse than animals. Animals only kill when they are threatened or need food. Human beings kill for pleasure, they kill for geopolitical power, they kill in very deceptive ways to achieve their aims, and they can kill with extreme cruelty and lack of compassion.

That being said, human intelligence has something special that other life forms don't. We are able to understand concepts and discriminate between them, contemplate them, and meditate on them. Being endowed with human intelligence provides us with the opportunity to think critically and evaluate things, and to set far-reaching goals for our lives. This is something that human intelligence enables us to do, if we use our intelligence wisely.

2. Being born in a central region

The second personal endowment is being born in a central region. This means being born in a central place that is under the influence of the words of the Dharma, and that has at least four members of the Sangha. According to the sutras (the records of the oral teachings of the Buddha), a central region is one in which it is possible to take monastic vows, meaning there are enough monks and nuns so that one can take monastic vows. According to tantra (the esoteric traditions in Buddhism), a central region is one where the Guhyasamaja tantra is taught. This is said to be the king of tantras. Those comprise the distinguishing factors of a central region. It doesn't mean that the country we live in is necessarily a Buddhist one. For instance, here in the U.S. we have the possibility of contacting sangha communities of monks and nuns, of hearing teachings, and of having a supportive community around us. It is possible to hear the Guhyasamaja teachings. The first tantric teaching given to us by Geshe Drakpa in San Antonio was the Guhyasamaja, thereby making San Antonio a central region at the time.

As we contemplate this, and all of the ten endowments or aspects of opportunity, each of us should ask ourselves, "Do I have this kind of opportunity or don't I?" We may have some of them and not have others. Also, notice how each one provides an opportunity in your lives that makes it easier for us to practice the Dharma.

3. Having complete sensory faculties

The third personal endowment is that we have complete and healthy sense and mental faculties. We can see, we can hear, smell, taste, and touch. We can think properly. We have intelligence. We're sane—we have all our marbles. Most of the time we take this all for granted, but for those among us who don't have complete sense and mental faculties, it's a really big thing. Not everyone has this opportunity. We could easily have been born blind or deaf or severely challenged mentally. The fact that we have our sensory faculties intact is a great blessing. Especially in terms of the Dharma, it enables us to practice in a more functional way.

If we didn't have all of our sense and mental faculties intact it would be much harder for us to practice

because we'd be spending a lot of our time just maintaining our life. We might not be able to read books or listen to teachings or to even think about them. We have so much going for us just because our body and sense faculties are functioning properly. If we can remember this and stop taking these things for granted, we can develop a feeling of real appreciation and enthusiasm about the opportunity this provides us for practicing the Dharma.

Very often we don't notice the good things we have going for us. We'll focus on the one or two things that frustrate us and blow them way out of proportion, then spend all of our time complaining about them. If we allowed ourselves to, we could waste our entire human life and all of our mental capacity complaining about things that are really the least important in terms of our lasting happiness. On top of that, we make ourselves and everyone around us unhappy!

When we engage in this meditation, if we can develop a real feeling for the opportunities we already have going for us in our life, we'll begin to feel more enthusiasm about the possibilities that presently exist for us on our spiritual path.

4. Having reversible karma (not perverted by the heinous crimes)

The fourth personal endowment is that we have reversible karma because we haven't done or caused others to commit any of the five heinous crimes. These five heinous crimes, or five deeds of immediate retribution as Lama Tsongkhapa calls them, are so powerful and negative that if one commits them and fails to purify them, then at the time of death it's as if one gets an irreversible "Go Directly to a Lower Realm" card and takes a zip line to one of those realms. This is because these karmas, or actions, are so heavy. One will certainly not gain a direct realization of emptiness and achieve liberation from cyclic existence in this life if one has committed these deeds. The five heinous crimes are:

1. Killing an arhat

An arhat is someone who has gained a direct, non-conceptual insight into emptiness—the true nature of existence—and has achieved nirvana and liberation from the endless cyclic existence of birth, aging, sickness, and death.

2. Killing your mother

Killing the person who gave birth to you, enabling you to have a precious human life. That's pretty heavy karma.

3. Killing your father

Killing the other person who was essential to your birth, without whom you would not have a precious human life. Again, that's pretty heavy karma.

4. Causing a schism in the Arya Sangha community

In other words, dividing the community of highly realized noble bodhisattvas and causing them to argue and fight. To a lesser degree, this also refers to promoting discord and disharmony within any community of Buddhist followers.

5. Drawing blood from the Buddha's body

This last heinous crime historically refers to the actions of Shakyamuni Buddha's cousin, Devadatta. Devadatta was an extremely jealous cousin and was always trying to kill the Buddha to prove that he was just as powerful. He drew blood from the Buddha's body in one of his attempts to kill him. The Buddha always survived these attempts, of course—sort of like the Roadrunner and the Coyote!

But we can see how heavy these karmic actions are, and why they have such negative karmic effects. People will do these kinds of things when their minds get completely twisted and violent. If we haven't done these things, we don't have that kind of heavy karma to purify.

We still have our everyday, run-of-the-mill negative karma to deal with and reverse. So it's still important for us to engage in purification practices, such as the confession section of the seven-limb practice that is part of the Preparatory Practices. This purification practice can be found in the second

topic in this series of *Key Practices of the Path* called, “Preparing the Mind for Meditation.”

5. Having enduring faith

The fifth personal endowment is that we have an instinctive, enduring faith in things that are worthy of respect, such as the Dharma, the value of ethics, and the path to enlightenment. There is a feeling inside us that life has a higher meaning than just the mundane goings-on of this planet; that human beings have incredible potential; that the Buddha taught something truly valuable to us about how we can uncover and realize that potential. As much as we are attracted and attached to worldly pleasures, we have an enduring faith that there must be something more. We have some confidence in the spiritual path, and we have some appreciation of ethics. Many people don't have this.

Many people in the world are basically concerned about being happy, living their life, having a nice family, and having enough food. They want a good job, good friends, and a good reputation—nothing wrong with that. But most people in the world probably don't wake up and say, “Today I am fortunate to have woken up, I am alive, I have a precious human life. I am not going to waste it. I have a day to practice the Dharma so I can become a buddha for the benefit of all beings.” Most people probably wake up thinking about what they can do that day that will make themselves and their family happy. Maybe get a cup of coffee and think about what they're going to have for breakfast. Many people do have ethical values, but those ethics can easily become compromised. People can very easily bend their ethical values when it suits them.

So it's really not the norm in this world to have an instinctive enduring faith in things like the Dharma, the value of ethics, and a spiritual path to develop our ultimate potential. Most people probably don't think about these things, so it's good to appreciate that we do. Buddhism would say that we have this as a habit from previous lives, which is why it feels instinctive to us now. It's something to really appreciate.

The five endowments in relation to others

Next we have the five endowments in relation to others and the societal conditions in which we live. Again, according to the *Shravaka Levels* these five are:

That a buddha has visited, that the sublime teaching is being taught,
That the teaching remains, that there are those who follow it,
That there is caring for others.

6. Living where a buddha has visited

“That a buddha has visited” (or is appearing), means that a bodhisattva has accumulated the collections of merit and sublime wisdom for three countless eons, and has reached the heart of enlightenment; i.e., become a perfect buddha. Such was the case with Shakyamuni Buddha, the buddha of our historical era. If a buddha hasn't come to a particular world, there will be no Dharma there. If a buddha does come but, for example, dies before teaching the Dharma, that buddha's coming will have been to no avail.

Strictly speaking we currently don't have a buddha living among us on this planet, but our wonderful gurus who hold the lineage of Shakyamuni Buddha are still alive and are representatives of the Buddha for us, so this sixth endowment of living where a buddha has visited is virtually fulfilled.

7. Living where the sublime teaching is being taught

“That the sublime teaching is being taught” means that a buddha or the disciples of that buddha are imparting the teaching. Over 2500 years ago in India, the disciples of Shakyamuni Buddha memorized his teachings and kept them alive orally after his passing into nirvana upon his death. Eventually around the first century B.C.E., the memorized oral teachings began to be put into written form so they would not be lost. These teachings were meticulously preserved. As Buddhism spread through India and then into Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), there were very learned practitioners, which led to the development of

commentaries on the Buddhist texts and different ways of systematizing the Buddha's teachings.

There were great Indian scholars and practitioners called pundits, such as Asanga, Vasubandu, Nagarjuna, and Chandrakirti. There were also different philosophical schools of tenets. People extracted particular points in the Buddha's teachings and emphasized those and interpreted them in a certain way. There was a system of debate that arose throughout ancient India, and Buddhists were always debating each other, which made their minds very sharp.

The teachings spread south into Thailand, South East Asia, and China. From China it spread into Korea, Japan, and into Tibet in the seventh century. The Tibetans have the most extensive collection of Buddhist teachings, including not only the texts containing the rules and procedures that govern the Buddhist monastic community (called the Vinaya) and the Mahayana texts which describe the bodhisattva path of love and compassion, but also the Tantric or Vajrayana texts, which present a special method by which we can progress along the path very quickly if we are properly prepared. In Tibet, these were carefully translated, written down and commented on, and they were preserved for centuries.

Then, due to the invasion of Tibet by China, the Tibetans left Tibet and the world was able to learn the Tibetan teachings. Tibet had been isolated for centuries because it was difficult to get in and difficult to get out. But since 1959, when thousands of people fled to India, the Tibetan teachings became more widespread in Western countries.

We are incredibly fortunate to have highly qualified Tibetan teachers who are direct links in this unbroken lineage who are currently teaching us. So, this seventh endowment in relation to others of living where the sublime teaching is being taught by the Buddha's disciples has also been virtually fulfilled because of our wonderful gurus.

8. Living where the teaching remains

The eighth endowment in relation to others is living where the teaching remains. The teachings are supposed to remain in a non-degenerate state and be put into practice so that through them we can actually achieve the path of the noble bodhisattvas. At present, the predicted five thousand years of transmission of the Buddha's teachings are still happening—they have not run their course. Although the teachings are still being transmitted externally, the fruit of the teachings will only flourish internally in our mind-streams if we develop realizations into the teachings. This hasn't happened: we don't have all the external teachings in our mind-streams, so we mustn't let the teachings that we *do* have in our mind-streams die out. Even if the Buddha's teachings are flourishing externally, if we let the teachings die out in our own mind-streams, *our* share of the teachings will have died out.

Not only have the Buddha's teachings remained, they have survived intact. The most precious and stainless tenets of the Indian and later Tibetan sects that combine the purest view of emptiness and the practices of both sutra and tantra are still available to us here and now. According to Pabongka Rinpoche, for such a thing to have happened is rarer than rare.

9. Living where there are those who follow the teachings

This ninth endowment in relation to others means that we live where there is a sangha community following the Buddha's teachings. When most people in the West say "sangha," they mean anybody who comes to a Dharma center. In the West, the word broadly refers to anyone who is a Buddhist or thinking about being a Buddhist. We are very lucky to have a community of laypeople around us—our supportive friends who help us and inspire us in our practice.

In the strictest sense of the word, "sangha" refers to those individuals, ordained or lay, who have had a direct, non-conceptual realization of emptiness. They are called the "Arya Sangha", or the Noble Sangha of Bodhisattvas—"awakened beings." This is the Sangha we are referring to when we take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

The next meaning of "sangha" is a community of four or more monks or nuns. In the East, when they talk about the sangha, they're referring to ordained monks and nuns. This ninth endowment is referring

specifically to a sangha community of monks and nuns.

10. Living where there is caring for others

This last endowment in relation to others is that we live where there are others who have loving concern. In other words, there are patrons, benefactors, or sponsors of our practice. There are teachers. All these people give us the conditions in which we can practice. We should also be grateful to our employers and our business customers because without them, we wouldn't have the material sustenance to practice. We live in a time and place where we aren't starving, we aren't homeless, and we have the material conditions to practice. This is a great blessing. If we didn't have the basic necessities of life, we would have to spend so much time getting them, we wouldn't have any time for Dharma practice. The fact that we have those things is a great fortune because it frees us up to use some of our time for practice.

We have access to teachers. This is very important. We need people to learn from. We can get a lot out of books. But we can't ask a book questions, and a book can't set an example for us to follow. Having access to living teachers is very important. When Buddhism first came to the West it was difficult to get teachings here and many people had to travel to India to find teachers. Now, teachers come here. So this endowment is also fulfilled. We have been very fortunate!

It's important to think about these eight freedoms and ten endowments so that we get a sense of optimism about practicing. We'll want to practice because we'll realize what a special and rare opportunity we have right now. Not all people have precious human lives. Human beings all have human lives, but a precious human life is quite different—not everyone has access to teachings and teachers. Not everyone has the material resources, not everyone has their senses intact, not everyone has even the inspiration to follow the path. Just the fact that we have an interest in developing our spiritual qualities is a very special trait we have, and it's something to feel happy about and to treasure in ourselves. This is not a reason to feel that we're better than other people or to look down on them, but it is a reason to really recognize what we have going for us.

The benefits of a precious human life

There are three basic levels of benefit that we can derive from our precious human life through our Dharma practice:

1. Benefits in the short-term
2. Ultimate benefits
3. Moment-to-moment benefits

Short-term benefits

In the short term, not only can we have a good life now, but we are able to prepare for our death and future rebirth. We can use our time and energy to purify the causes that would result in an unfortunate rebirth for us. Buddhism has a number of methods for purifying negative karma. One of these methods is to meditate on the confession section of the Seven-limb Puja found in "Preparing the Mind for Meditation", one of the preliminary topics in our *Key Practices of the Path* series. From a Buddhist standpoint, a good rebirth is one in which we not only have health, prosperity, and happiness, but one in which we again have the opportunity to encounter the teachings and teachers, and to practice the path.

Ultimate benefits

To derive the ultimate benefits from a precious human life means that with our human life we can attain liberation from cyclic existence, and we can attain complete enlightenment. These are called ultimate benefits because they are the final spiritual realization of our potential.

Liberation from cyclic existence comes when we have achieved the state of an arhat—someone who

has removed all forms of attachment, all forms of aversion, and all ignorance from their consciousness. All of the karma that causes rebirth has been purified. At that point we have attained nirvana—the cessation of the cycle—and therefore liberation from it. We abide in a state of bliss.

The other ultimate benefit of having a precious human life is that with it we can attain the state of full enlightenment. Not only can we free ourselves from cyclic existence and attain our own liberation, but beyond that, we are able to purify the subtlest stains on our mind. We can completely develop our love and compassion so we have all the skills and talents we need to be of benefit to all other beings.

The teachings say that just having a precious human life is like winning half the battle to enlightenment, even though we may personally feel far away from it. Considering we can accomplish the other half, and there exist methods, such as tantra, for attaining enlightenment in this very lifetime without having to go through successive lifetimes, we are very fortunate to encounter them. This gives us a strong meaning and purpose in our life to work towards.

We can also use our human life to focus on achieving rebirth in a buddha's "pure land" or buddha-field, which generally speaking is a buddha's field of influence. Some buddha-fields are considered to be superior places to spiritually train for full buddhahood, since a buddha has purified it for this purpose and since in these realms, one can meet a buddha face to face and study under them.

There are different pure lands. Today, the most commonly-known pure land is that of Buddha Amitabha, called Sukhavati, or "Land of Bliss". Mahayana Buddhists may also aspire to be reborn in other pure lands such as Shambhala, or the Buddha-fields of Akshobhya, Medicine Buddha, and Padmasambhava. The way to be born in one of these pure lands is to learn about its qualities and advantages, and to develop a very strong wish to be born there. The causes to be born in one of these pure lands are: keeping pure morality, good ethical conduct, thinking of loving-compassion, remembering the qualities of the particular buddha and their buddha-field, and dedicating all the positive potential you create from all these practices for that kind of rebirth. For a good practitioner, a precious human life is better than being born in a pure land because it is said if you use the tantric methods and you are a good practitioner, you can attain enlightenment much more quickly in a precious human body than you can in a pure land. The ultimate goal is enlightenment, and both kinds of rebirths are advantageous, depending on the kind of practitioner you are.

Moment-to-moment benefits

We can make our lives meaningful each moment by transforming all our activities into part of our spiritual practice. We can think throughout the day, "may everything I think, do, or say be of benefit." When we sweep the floor or wash the dishes, do the laundry or take a shower—any kind of cleaning, we imagine we are cleaning up the negative karma and delusions of ourselves and others with wisdom and compassion. When we get in the car, we can sit for a moment and think, "I know where I'm going in my life—enlightenment—and I know why I'm going there—for the benefit of all beings." When we're at a red light or stuck in traffic, we can look around at all the other beings in the vehicles around us and on the sidewalk and think, "Everyone around me wants to be happy and they don't want to suffer, just like me." Then try to generate loving compassion for them, instead of frustration and anger.

When we start our job in the morning, think, "I will try to be of benefit to everyone I encounter while I'm working today." When we're finished and head back to our house or apartment, think, "I want to benefit everybody I see at home and wherever I am going this evening."

We transform little everyday things into Dharma practice. When the phone rings, we can take a couple of seconds before answering to think, "May I be of benefit to the person on the other end of the line." Then answer and say hello. When we enter through the door of a grocery store or office or house, think, "I am leading all beings to liberation and enlightenment." When we go out of the door, think, "I am leading all beings out of cyclic existence."

When we go upstairs or go up in an elevator, think, "I am leading myself and others up to higher states of being and developing our realizations." When we go downstairs or down in an elevator, think, "I am

going into all the suffering places in this world, out of compassion, to really be of benefit to all others.” In this way, if we become aware and creative, we can transform all the ordinary circumstances of our daily life into the path to enlightenment. This can become a powerful form of positive programming for our mind, which in turn will transform how we speak and behave. It only takes about 15 seconds to do each time, but the difference it makes can be huge. All we have to do is train ourselves to practice this.

The rarity of a precious human life and the difficulty of creating its causes

It’s important for us to grasp how rare it is to have a precious human life, so that we get a sense of how meaningful and special it really is. It’s difficult to create the causes for it because it’s difficult to act ethically. All we have to do is look at the world around us to see the frequency and intensity of unethical actions as opposed to ethical ones, and we begin to see how difficult it is to keep good ethical conduct.

Killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct abound all around us. We hear manipulative lies, divisive and derogatory speech, and meaningless drivel on a daily basis—just on TV alone! Corporate and political greed and deceit with the intention of causing harm to many for the benefit of a few is blatantly evident upon investigation. And wrong views are held up as being correct and true.

In this kind of environment is it easy or difficult to be generous and patient, or maintain ethical discipline? What about enthusiastic, joyous effort that takes delight in doing constructive, virtuous actions? How much delight do we have? How much drudgery do we have? How much time do we spend each day cultivating our concentration and wisdom? How much of our positive potential do we dedicate to the enlightenment of all sentient beings? These are all causes for having a precious human rebirth.

What is our habitual behavior right now? What actions do we do very well and which ones don’t we? It’s very difficult to create the causes. The life we personally have now is really a miracle if you think about it, so let us use it wisely. We have the potential to become a buddha. Why waste it? Let’s put our energy into creating the causes for a precious human rebirth and enlightenment.

An analogy for its rarity and the difficulty of acquiring it

In the Buddhist scriptures there is a story about a sea tortoise that serves as an analogy for the rarity of a precious human life and the difficulty of acquiring it.

There is this blind tortoise in a huge, vast ocean. The tortoise is usually at the bottom of the ocean but comes to the surface once every 100 years. There is a golden yoke with one hole—like a ring-shaped golden lifesaver—floating on the ocean, being blown by the wind. What are the odds that a blind tortoise who only comes to the surface of the ocean every hundred years will stick its head through the hole in the golden yoke? Pretty slim, considering how vast the ocean is. Sometimes the tortoise surfaces thousands of miles away, sometimes only a foot away. But still it doesn’t matter, because the tortoise has missed it and will have to wait for another 100 years to try again.

The way the analogy relates to us is this: the ocean is like the ocean of cyclic existence. The blind tortoise is like us, blinded by our ignorance. Being at the bottom of the ocean is like being born in all the unfortunate realms where it’s very difficult and there’s a lot of confusion and darkness. Coming up once every 100 years is like acquiring a good rebirth—not necessarily a precious human rebirth, but any kind of human rebirth, or being reborn as a god or demigod. We’re only up there for a brief time and then we go back down again. The golden yoke, the golden lifesaver, is the Buddha’s teachings—the Dharma. It’s floating around cyclic existence, going from place to place as if being blown by the wind. The Dharma goes from India to Sri Lanka, from Thailand to China, from Tibet to the West, all over the place. It’s never stationary. The golden yoke, the Buddha’s Dharma, keeps shifting places. Because we’re blinded by our ignorance and misconceptions, we’re usually in the unfortunate realms and come up to the surface once in a great while. Putting our head through the hole of the golden lifesaver is like getting a precious human life and meeting with the Buddha’s teachings. By thinking about this analogy we can get a sense of how precious this opportunity we have is, and a feeling of how important it is to use it wisely.

It's difficulty in acquiring in terms of its nature and numbers

To see if it's rare or not to have a human life that's precious in nature, we look at the number of beings that have precious human lives. There are approximately 7.9 billion humans living on the earth right now, but how many of them have precious human lives in terms of the eight freedoms and ten endowments? If you compare the number of human beings in general to the number of land animals, marine animals, and insects, it is astounding. Hundreds of millions of flies can fit into a space that won't hold ten humans. The number of animals and insects living in a typical suburban neighborhood compared to the number of humans living there is mind-boggling. In the lower realms the numbers are even greater. It is said there are fewer hungry ghosts than hell beings; still fewer animals; and fewer land animals than marine. When we start looking at the numbers of beings in the upper realms versus the number in the lower realms, the number of animals versus the number of human beings, the number of human beings versus the number of those with precious human lives, we see that we have a very precious and rare opportunity, something to really value.

One time the Buddha bent down to scoop up a little bit of dust on his finger nail, and he said, "The number of beings who have an upper rebirth is like the dust in my fingernail, and the number of beings who have unfortunate rebirths is like all the dust in the whole world."

When we think about this, it starts to sink in that this opportunity is very rare and very difficult to get. We feel we must use it wisely. We must pull ourselves together and not waste the opportunity we have.

Practicing loving-kindness

One of the most important things for us to practice is loving-kindness. We may have different goals in our life than others do, but we still are very connected to them. They benefit us in so many ways. We live in this world together. We depend on them and they depend on us. We are very related, and as we cultivate a feeling of loving-kindness more and more, we recognize that even though we all think differently and may have different beliefs and goals in our lives, what we are all looking for is happiness.

We may have different ideas of what happiness is, and different methods to attain our own vision of happiness, but that's not a reason to feel separated and alienated from others. We all want happiness. We can't live on our own, it's impossible. We are intimately related with all the beings who share this planet.

As we get into the practice of Dharma and start to understand how our own mind and our own feelings work, we begin to better understand others' minds and feelings. Because we've taken the time to start looking at ourselves, we understand better what others are going through. That breaks down our sense of isolation and separateness and gives us a feeling that we have something to offer others because we have a connection with them. We see that through cultivating our own inner development, there is a lot we can do for others, and it can come out in very small, but very significant ways.

We simply engage with others, and if we're friendly and pleasant and understanding, we convey that to them. It doesn't matter whether they know we're a Buddhist or not. We really communicate with them in a way that lets them know we want them to be happy, because that's what we all want. We can do this anywhere, with people at work, or at the store, or at the bank. With tradesmen and lawyers, with cashiers and CEOs, with the neighbor's cat or the insects in our yard. We just practice basic human kindness and communicate. When we make our life meaningful through the Dharma, we actually feel more in tune with others and with life itself.

It's important to remember that all the great spiritual masters and gurus and meditators had the same kind of life we have—the same precious human life, the same qualities, the same opportunities. And they made use of their precious life. If we put in some effort, we can also make use of our life. We have the same qualities and opportunities, the same freedoms and endowments. Look at His Holiness the Dalai Lama and all the wonderful qualities he has. He is a human being, just like us. If he can be like that, we can also. It's important to remember that.

It's important to remember the preciousness and purpose of our life and to not waste it—to not waste a moment. We're like a beggar who has found a precious diamond hidden in their pocket. The beggar isn't

going to waste any time in using that diamond to completely transform their life. Hidden within this human life of ours we have a mind that is capable of awakening from the deep sleep of ignorance and blossoming like a lotus flower to the knowledge of all things. We have a mind that is capable of developing loving-kindness, joy, compassion, patience, generosity, confidence, and wisdom to perfection. We have the kind of life right now that provides us with the freedom and opportunity to accomplish this. Let's make use of it!