

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 3:
“The Lower Realms”

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 by Ven. Thubten Chodron. Prepared and compiled by Christopher Moroney.

“After death, just like a shadow follows the body, the results of black and white karma follow.”

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

In this *Key Practices of the Path* series, 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 teachings are essentially a gradual course in training the mind in the stages of the path to enlightenment. 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. It’s similar to how we can’t jump directly from our first grade at school to beginning our post-graduate studies without first successfully completing grade school, middle school, high school, and university levels.

This teaching on the lower realms comes directly from Ven. Thubten Chodron. Her keen insight into the Buddha’s teachings and her ability to present those teachings to Western students in a way that is psychologically and spiritually meaningful are among the most helpful I’ve encountered, particularly regarding the topic of the lower realms, which can be so difficult for Westerners. All credit goes to her and her lineage of wonderful teachers.

Summary of previous talks

We’re in the middle of the meditation topics in the initial-scope of the *Lam Rim*. The goal of a person who is practicing the initial-scope is to cultivate the causes for attaining a fortunate rebirth in cyclic existence, either as a human, or as a being in a higher realm. We’ve talked about what makes a human life precious, what its opportunities are, all the good qualities it has, and how difficult it is to attain. We talked about the purpose of our human life, how we can really make use of this opportunity to tap into the potential we have to become a buddha, to uncover it, and to make our lives meaningful for others.

But this life is relatively short: it goes by quickly. Death is the inevitable result of having taken birth, so death is something all of us have to face someday. There’s no way around it. If we can prepare for it properly, death doesn’t have to be frightening. It can actually be blissful.

I’ve told some of you about the passing of our dear Dharma friend, Carolyn Swan. Many of you remember her. Carolyn was a Buddhist practitioner from her early adult years in the 1960s until her death in 2016. She lived in India for some of that time. Her guru was His Holiness Sakya Trizin, the head of the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism. Carolyn meditated and practiced three hours every morning without fail, even when she was traveling. A couple of days before she passed, Covita and I were in her bedroom saying prayers. As we were reciting the Heart Sutra, Carolyn exclaimed, “I can see the smoke-like

appearance!” which is one of the early internal signs which appear to the mind as death is approaching. She was very happy, even excited. After Carolyn passed away she remained in her bed for several days. When we visited her the day after she died, she looked exquisite. Her husband Marc and her daughter Ava had placed beautiful flowers all around her on the bed and on her body. Far from looking dead, she looked almost radiant. She had a great sense of humor, and when I sat down next to her by the bed, I could sense her humor, and there was a very light and positive feeling in the room.

Several years later, His Holiness Sakya Trizin spoke about Carolyn in a Wisdom Podcast recorded at Tsechen Kunchab Ling, the U.S. seat of His Holiness in Walden, New York. He said:

“One of our students is an American lady. Her name’s Carolyn. She was not a very serious practitioner as such, but she received many teachings from many gurus for the last so many years. She passed a few years ago, and when she passed away, she was in *tukdam*. When you die, when you are in *tukdam*, you don’t change your colors. And there is no smell. The body doesn’t decay. She was not a secret practitioner. She did some retreats. Not so many retreats, but she received so many teachings, so many initiations, and so many teachings from many great gurus.

“At the time of death, due to the dissolving of the elements, everybody experiences the [fundamental] clear light [mind]. Those who lack practice, they cannot recognize it, they become unconscious. But those who have certain experience—meditational experience, they can recognize the basic clear light [of death, called mother clear light], as well as the [experience of] clear light they’ve gained through meditation [called son clear light]. Therefore, mother and son, they can recognize each other, and then they can remain. [This is called *tukdam* .] As long as they can remain in this meditation, the body doesn’t decay. Those in *tukdam* can remain for 100 hours or even 200 hours without the body decaying. I had heard about other Westerners doing this, but [with Carolyn] this was our own experience.”

A similar thing happened with our guru, Geshe Drakpa, when he passed away in 2017. Geshe-la was an accomplished meditator—before we met him, he had just completed nine years in meditative retreat in the mountains above Dharamsala. Those who were with him in India when he died said he remained in a non-decaying state of clear light meditation, or *tukdam*, for a full week until a red drop came out of his nostril, indicating his consciousness had left the body.

What happened to Geshe Drakpa and Carolyn didn’t happen by accident. Nothing actually happens accidentally in life—even so-called ‘accidents’. Things don’t just happen out of nowhere; they happen due to causes. We have to look at our own life and see if we have created the causes to die in a similar way. This is a very scientific thing – things happen due to causes. So we have to examine the causes we’ve created as an indication of what kinds of things are likely to happen to us in the future.

At death time, our consciousness starts to separate from this body. Life starts when the consciousness and this body are joined together. Dying is when they are starting to separate, and death is when that separation is complete and the consciousness goes on to take some other body influenced, of course, by previous actions.

This would indicate that we are not our body. This is a big thing especially for us Westerners because we are so attached to the body. So much of our ego identity is wrapped up in our body. We aren’t our body, though the consciousness changes a lot depending on the body. Similarly after death, when our consciousness takes another body, we’ll be influenced by the physical structure of that body as well. The body we take in our future life will depend on the causes that we’ve created—in our previous lives and in this lifetime.

The ripening of karma at death time

The type of karma that ripens at the time of our death which throws us into another body also depends on causes. At death time, the sum total of positive and negative actions aren’t just put on a scale that somebody looks at and decides whether we go up or go down. According to Buddhism, there’s nobody

judging, there's nobody determining; nobody's running the show and punishing people. Things just naturally happen due to causes and conditions. Our karma isn't calculated and added up. In one lifetime we create many, many different kinds of karmic seeds.

For instance, today all of us have already had many different thoughts, done many different actions, and had many resulting imprints on our mind-stream. Throughout the day, we're constantly engaged either mentally, physically, or verbally; constantly leaving energy traces or imprints on our mind-stream. Out of all these imprints, which ones are going to manifest and ripen at the time of our death? Not all of them can. Certain ones will, and these are the ones that will propel our consciousness into a certain kind of body in a future lifetime. There are three ways that our karma can ripen at the time of our death:

1. Karma ripening from powerful actions

The first kind of karmic imprints that are likely to ripen at death are from very powerful actions. If we've done an extremely powerful negative action even one time, such as killing our father or mother, or killing an arhat—a highly realized bodhisattva, these actions manifest first, because they're so potent, they weigh so heavily on our mind-stream. Similarly, if we've done some very powerful positive actions, something very altruistic or in relation to the Buddha-Dharma-Sangha, these positive karmic actions can manifest or ripen at the time of death.

2. Karma ripening from habitual actions

If there are no outstanding powerful actions in our mind-stream at death time, then the ones that are likely to ripen are the ones that are more habitual. Just through the force of doing something habitually, a powerful propensity builds up in the mind. We can see it with any habit we have now in this life. Very small habits, just by our doing them over and over again, become very strong and difficult to break, for example, habitually getting angry or lying, or habitually being generous or kind.

3. Karma ripening from the condition or state of our mind

Also, the type of thoughts we have while we're dying create the condition, or the fertile ground for a lot of the karma that ripens. This is a really important point. We can see that even now when we're awake, if our mind is calm and peaceful, things go better in our environment and our experience, than when our mind is disturbed and upset. Similarly, at death time, if the mind is filled with clinging and attachment—not wanting to leave this life, clinging to relationships, clinging to the body; or if the mind is filled with anger—anger at dying, anger at things that happened years ago—if the mind is disturbed in that kind of way at the time of death, that acts like the fertilizer that makes it possible for those negative karmic seeds to grow. That's why when somebody is dying or when we're dying, we should try to keep the room really peaceful and calm, try not to generate attachment or aversion or anxiety in a person when they're dying.

So our Dharma practice is especially important at death time. Because if the mind is able to be in a very positive state, we can remember our teacher, or our refuge in the Buddha-Dharma-Sangha, or we can generate loving kindness at the time we die. If we can think of emptiness, like Carolyn and Geshe Drakpa did, then the mind is in a very positive state, and that also acts as the fertilizer which encourages the ripening of previously created positive actions.

Facing the possibility of rebirth in the lower realms

The next point we go into here in this sequence of *Lam Rim* topics, is the meditation on the lower realms. We talked about the preciousness of human life, the inevitability of death and how to make our life meaningful. Then we have to consider what kind of rebirth we can have after we die, either an upper one or a lower one.

Of course, we'd all like to think if we *are* reborn, then we'll have another human life, or maybe even something better. But it's also good—and wise—to be realistic and ask what happens if things don't go so well? If we really look at the karma we've created in this lifetime and if we're very honest with ourselves,

we should be asking the question: has the amount of my positive karma exceeded the amount of my negative karma? Which do I have more of? Which is more likely to ripen? If we really look at and think about the different destructive actions we've engaged in, and which ones we've actually succeeded in abandoning, we might come to realize that because cause and effect is an observable fact, there is a chance that we will take an unpleasant rebirth simply because we've created the causes for it.

We all like to think about things that are beautiful and wonderful. We tend to block out things we consider disagreeable. If something is nice, then we like to think about it and we like to believe it; but if it makes us feel uneasy inside, then we don't really want to think about it and we don't want to believe it. In other words, very often we are using as the criteria for what we believe or don't believe, whether we like it or not. That's not a real wise criteria to use to evaluate what exists and doesn't exist. If something actually exists, it doesn't make any difference whether we believe it or not. That just shows our personal preferences, our mental blocks, and our biases. So we have to be little bit more open-minded and a little more courageous to examine the possibility of lower realms.

When we listen to Buddhist descriptions of lower realms and rebirth, we have to try to put aside—at least temporarily—the Judeo-Christian mindset that has pervaded the western world for centuries. One of the biggest blocks we have as Westerners is that we tend to look at Buddhism and project Judeo-Christian meaning and values onto it, and then we get very confused. So, it's important to remember when we are talking about this, that according to Buddhism, lower rebirth is not a punishment. Nobody sends us there, and it's not taught in order to make us afraid or intimidated, or to control us.

So the question may arise, why did the Buddha teach about unfortunate states of rebirth? People often think maybe he just did it to try and scare us into being good. And we can see clearly how this reflects our pervasive Western religious culture—a kind of scare tactic to make us behave. But the Buddha didn't need to teach us things to make us fearful and terrified. There are already enough fearful and terrifying things in the world as is. That's not why the Buddha taught about lower realms and rebirth. In the context of our path to liberation and enlightenment, there's absolutely no purpose in our becoming terrified.

The Buddha taught about the lower realms out of compassion for us, because he was able to see that within our mind-streams there may exist the causes to take a lower rebirth. If we can learn about them beforehand, then we can purify those causes and we can stop creating more causes for it. For instance, if there was a bomb in your car and you didn't know it, and somebody came and told you about it, and you said, "Oh, you're just telling me that to make me afraid." That would be kind of reckless and foolish, wouldn't it? Instead if we realize the person is warning us about something serious because they care about our welfare, then perhaps we'll look under the hood and take action to do something about it.

Also, in order for us to develop genuine love and compassion for all beings, which is something we really want to do in our hearts as Buddhists, how can we do it unless we're able to reflect on others' sufferings and miseries? For example, the misery someone experiences when they're born in an unfortunate realm. How can we be in touch with the misery of being born there if we don't even want to think about the existence of those realms or even acknowledge our own possibility of being born there? In order to establish a connection to others' experience of pain so that we can generate genuine compassion for them, we have to also be willing to tap into our own problems and own sufferings. Otherwise, our love and compassion is unstable. It's fair-weather compassion. We'll lack the skill and courage and wisdom it takes to have genuine love and compassion the moment any situation becomes truly unpleasant, difficult, and challenging. If we have an untrained mind that's easily overwhelmed, how can we possibly benefit others?

Types of lower realms

People often have a lot of doubt about the existence of lower realms and rebirths. Generally, Buddhism talks about three unfortunate kinds of rebirth.

1. Animal realm

One is as an animal. We can see them with our eyes and we can't deny their existence. Of course we

can think, “How can I, as a human be born as an animal?” But again, we have to connect with the fact that the thing we think of as “me” is not our human body. We refer to our body as “my body”, as if whoever it is we think we are is the owner or possessor of it. In addition, just think of all the different shapes our bodies have been from the time of conception until now. We can begin to see that we really aren’t our body. We can see that animals have a consciousness and mind, they experience pain and pleasure, and so they are living beings just like we are. It is just that their consciousness is born into that kind of body. Likewise, our consciousness can take that kind of rebirth. It’s a little bit easier to understand the possibility of this because at least we can see animals.

2. *Hungry ghost realm*

The other two unfortunate realms we don’t often see. The next one is the hungry ghost realm, or *preta* in Sanskrit. This realm consists of beings who experience extreme hunger, thirst, and craving, and it also include spirits. When psychic people are channeling, they sometimes channel spirits from this unfortunate realm.

3. *Hell realm*

The third lower realm is the one of extreme pain and suffering. Sometimes it’s called the hellish realm or hell realm and is characterized by extreme heat or cold. There’s a lot of physical anguish in this realm. When we hear the descriptions of these three realms, we sometimes say “Okay, animals exist, but I don’t know about the hungry ghosts and the hell realm.”

Understanding existence: Types of phenomena

To be able to better understand existence, we need to understand three different kinds of phenomena:

1. *Manifest phenomena*

This refers to phenomena we can contact directly with our senses. A computer is a manifest phenomenon, the chair you’re sitting on, things like that. Animals are manifest phenomena, because we can see them, touch them, hear them, smell them, taste them, and cognize them.

2. *Hidden phenomena*

Hidden phenomena are referring to those things that we understand through inference. For example, emptiness or lack of inherent existence comes under this category, because we understand emptiness initially through logic or inference, and only later do we realize it with direct perception. Another example would be if we saw smoke coming from a hill in the distance. We would infer that there must be fire if there’s smoke, even though the fire is hidden from our view.

3. *Extremely hidden phenomena*

The third is called extremely hidden phenomena. These are things that we come to understand through accepting somebody else’s word on it because that person is very knowledgeable and has no reason at all to deceive us.

There are different kinds of things that we know in different ways. A table, we know from direct perception. The lack of inherent existence, we have to use logic first and eventually go to direct perception. And then other things, like the realms of the hungry ghosts or the hell beings, those might be manifest phenomena for the beings living within them. But for us, they are extremely hidden and we have to rely on the word of somebody else to understand them and then keep checking it out to see if it makes sense for us.

If the Buddha’s words seem true to us, then that gives a little space in our mind to begin to consider the existence of the lower realms that we can’t see. We might take the idea of these lower realms on as a hypothesis, or provisionally accept them because the Buddha described them. The Buddha tends to know what he’s talking about and there is no reason why he would try and deceive us.

Some of us might be thinking, “Maybe it’s possible for these realms to exist, and maybe it was not the Buddha’s intention to terrify us by explaining them to us. But couldn’t we get the same motivation to

purify and to develop our good qualities if the Buddha just explained the positive aspects of rebirth to us? If we got positive reinforcement rather than negative reinforcement, wouldn't that work better?" In many cases, positive reinforcement does work better. When we hear about the qualities of the Buddha and that we have the same untapped buddha nature within us, we can be inspired to cultivate our potential so we can be like that. That's nice to think about. We'll start thinking, "I can do that, I want to do that."

But let's think about some other situations in which we hear about the positive effects of something but it still doesn't work to motivate us very much.

For instance, take somebody who is very overweight. They go to the doctor and if the doctor says, "You'll feel so much better if you lose weight," they'll say, "Yes, yes, I agree." And then on the way home they stop at 7-Eleven or Circle-K and buy some Twinkies, Ding Dongs, and a couple of pints of Häagen-Dazs. Even though they know better, somehow the positive motivation doesn't move them to actually lose the weight. But if the doctor says, "Look, you're going to get a heart attack and go into cardiac arrest if you don't lose some weight," then the person becomes a bit apprehensive and they go directly home and go on a diet. This is for their own good. The doctor is not trying to control them.

So sometimes hearing about the negative consequences can motivate us in ways that just hearing about the positive consequences can't. That's why it's important to think about these kinds of rebirths. Because as Ven. Thubten Chodron says, sometimes we get very, very lazy in our practice and we rationalize and procrastinate. Sometimes thinking about the possibility of a lower rebirth can wake us up and make it extremely easy to practice. The mind becomes very motivated.

Are the lower realms a creation of the mind?

These different realms of existence are dependent arisings. The Buddha didn't create the lower realms. They come into existence because the causes for them exist. And the cause is negative action. Our own personal negative action is what creates our rebirth in a lower realm. The lower realms, in some ways, are definitely created by the mind. Our actions are what propel us to take that kind of rebirth.

There's an interesting quote from Shantideva, the great Indian sage, who said,

By whom were they zealously forged, these weapons of hell? Who made the burning iron ground and whence did the conflagration come?

And then he answered,

The sage [meaning the Buddha] has taught that everything like that is from the evil mind, there's nothing to be feared in the three realms apart from the mind.

In other words, it's our own mind that creates our existence in the lower realms. How does that happen? How does that arise? How can we get some kind of feeling that it's possible to take that kind of rebirth? Something that can help us get a feel for this is if we remember a time when we were really paranoid and very fearful, terrified, so freaked out and frightened. And due to our fear, there was also a lot of underlying anger, because fear and anger go hand-in-hand. If you can remember a time in your life when you were like that, then imagine getting stuck in that mental state. So stuck in that fearful, paranoid, angry mental state, that everything you saw, you saw through that filter. And if that mental state became so intense that it began to appear externally to you as your environment and your body, that would be what the hell realm is like.

We can see this even in the case of people who are in a human body. If somebody has a very disturbed mind, even though nobody else is trying to harm them, they see harm. Even though there's no danger, they're terrified. Even if somebody takes them out of their environment and puts them into another one, they still see things exactly the same way, because the mind is so stuck.

Or, remember a time in your life when you had so much craving and clinging and wanted something so

badly, but you didn't have it—how your mind was completely obsessed. You couldn't function because your mind was so totally stuck. This can occur sometimes, for instance, when a relationship breaks up. Our mind is just completely stuck on the other person and we can't think about anything else. There's so much clinging, attachment and frustration. Again, imagine that mental state becoming so intense and huge, that it appears to you as your environment and your body, so that your whole life experience is one of clinging and continuous frustration. Everything you want evades you, and your mind is obsessed all the time—that is the realm of the hungry ghosts.

Or have you ever experienced a time when your mind was really foggy, like when you've had a bad hangover or when you were just coming out of anaesthesia—when you know you can think better but you just can't do it? A state of mind where you can't put two and two together, no matter how hard you try. You're just totally fogged up so that you can't comprehend clearly, you can't make logical decisions, and you can only seem to act on instinct. Again, take that confused, very obscured state of mind and turn it into the environment, turn it into your body, turn it into your life experience, and for the most part that's basically what the animal realm is like—a kind of fogged-up, instinct-based thinking.

What would it be like to be a chicken, or a deer, or a fish, or a worm, or a bug? What do they think about all day? They have mind-streams with Buddha potential—all sentient beings do, yet their minds are so obscured, what can they do? Every morning when I feed the deer on our property and I make eye contact with them, I get a sense of these living, conscious beings who want to be happy, who don't want to suffer, and whose physical brains are incapable of letting their consciousness do much more than go through the instinctive processes of searching for food, being alert to danger, and maintaining the life cycle of the herd. The same goes for our chickens—they have these incredible behavioral instincts, but that's about all. Still, I can clearly they want to be happy and they don't want to suffer.

If we think in these ways about our mental states and how they're connected to the way we perceive our environment and our body, we may begin to get a feeling of how it's possible for our mind-stream to take different kinds of rebirths. It isn't really such an impossible thing to contemplate. His Holiness the Dalai Lama once said, "I really wish there weren't lower realms, I really wish these things didn't exist and I didn't have to teach about them." But that's not really the point—what we wish existed or didn't exist.

Why think about the lower realms?

1. Increase mindfulness to stop destructive behavior patterns

The reason it's helpful to learn about the lower realms and then to think about them is that by doing so we can take this knowledge and use it in a wise way, to make our lives meaningful right now. By understanding these kinds of sufferings and other types of rebirths, it gives us a powerful incentive to purify our actions and to stop following our continual destructive behavior patterns. It's especially effective when we notice that we're starting to get into some of our old behavior patterns, to remember that these destructive actions are leaving imprints on our mind-stream that could possibly ripen into some kind of lower rebirth. Do we want to experience the results of our negative actions? If we don't want results that are similar to the cause, maybe we should think twice about telling someone off and losing our temper. If we don't want results similar to the cause, maybe we should think twice about cheating somebody in business, or manipulatively lying to others to get our way.

So, it can be very helpful to think about the lower realms. It helps us break the kinds of destructive habits that we really don't like in ourselves anyway. Nobody really likes to lose their temper and tell people off, and yet it can be such a hard habit to break. If we could remember the effects that this will have on our future lives, it gives us a lot more self-control and energy to not act on our negative impulses, and to do some kind of purification practice for any kind of destructive behavior we've done in the past. Thinking about the lower realms can have a very beneficial, very strong effect on the mind.

2. Protect ourselves from sufferings in future lives

Just as we try to protect ourselves from even the slightest suffering now in this life, we should try to protect ourselves from the possibility of future sufferings in future lives. Think about how we feel in this

life when we're too hungry, or too tired, or too hot, or too cold; how difficult it is to do much of anything, let alone something virtuous like studying and practicing the Dharma. What if in some future life, due to our negative karma, we get really, really stuck in those kinds of environments? How can we practice? How can we lift ourselves up and out of there?

So, if we have the possibility now to eliminate the causes for that, then it is well worth our while to be cautious. If we start thinking, "All that lower realms stuff is just to make me afraid, so I don't believe in it!", our minds could become obscured by our own pride and arrogance. But if we take these teachings of the Buddha to heart, they can really invigorate our practice. If we try to prevent in this life even a small suffering that we might experience tomorrow, why wouldn't we try to prevent a larger suffering that we could possibly experience in a future rebirth? It makes sense to do that.

3. *Transform our minds*

If we do have some faith that it's in our nature to have the potential to become a Buddha, then if we practice well, our mental state can get better and better. That is, if we develop our loving-kindness, develop our patience, our generosity, our wisdom, our mind can get better and better, it can get happier and happier. What happens if we don't do that and instead, we develop our anger, our jealousy, our pride and our attachment? Well, in a similar way, we'll get better and better at being angry, jealous, proud and attached. The difference is our mental state won't get closer to Buddhahood, our mental state will just degenerate.

It would be really illogical to think, "Oh yes, yes, my mind can become a Buddha but it can't become an animal or it can't become a hungry ghost." We can clearly see that the kind of person we become is completely dependent on our mental states, on our mental habits, on what kind of things we cultivate. We can cultivate our good qualities or we can just let our bad qualities run the show. It's completely up to us, our whole experience that follows is a result of our own mental states.

Our mental states do affect the kind of body we have, even this body. It's well known that our mental state can contribute to problems like ulcers and high blood pressure. There is a connection between the body and the mind. If we just let the mind go in any direction, our body in this life will also go in the corresponding direction, and so will our body in the next life. If we take the time to develop loving-kindness and patience, our body will be affected by that in this life. There are all sorts of statistics in the medical profession about how people are healed from diseases much more rapidly if they have a good mental state. Our mental state does affect our body in this life, it does affect the body in future lives. There is a relationship between body and mind.

Lower realms: Mental state, Physical state, or Illusion?

People often wonder whether the different realms are just mental states, rather than physically existing places. Well for us humans, the animal realm definitely seems to be a physical realm, because we can experience it with our physical senses. The realm of hungry ghosts and spirits is interesting because it either exists or it doesn't depending on what kind of culture you live in. People from indigenous cultures that live close to the land see ghosts and spirits regularly and often communicate with them. Ngawang Thogme, who was Lama Passang's classmate at Drepung Monastery, used to tell us stories about ghosts and spirits that lived in and around his mountain village in a region of northwest India that used to be part of Tibet. One time at the dinner table he told us a story about three mischievous female ghosts and an old man from his village (and what they did one night), and another story about a being in the forest that was part man and part tree. When he saw the incredulous look on our faces, he asked us in all seriousness, "Don't you believe me?" When I was growing up in Massachusetts, I personally knew a couple of people who regularly saw little elf-like spirits in the woods. A lot of people have experiences with ghosts and spirits. Another friend of ours here in San Antonio saw the ghost of a young girl standing in the doorway of her bedroom. Maybe in the West it's pooh-poohed among some to call these phenomena spirits—it's labeled as something else, or its causes are attributed to something else.

There is some discussion about whether the lower realms are actual physical places or not. Some people

say they are actually physical places, like the hungry ghost realm and the hell realm. Maybe they are physical places of some sort, but are they real or not real? Well, is this life real or not real? It's real insofar as our particular senses are concerned. So in one way you could say, "Maybe each realm is as real as the karma that creates it, because what we are perceiving in this life is a creation of our karma. Maybe the environment in another realm is as real as the environment we're experiencing now."

Other Lamas say that the hell realm, for example, is purely karmically created, it's an illusion. In other words, it's not a real physical place but it appears that way so vibrantly because of one's karma. When we have some kind of hallucination or when we're dreaming, often we're completely convinced what we're experiencing is real. So hallucinations and dreams are illusory but we experience them as real. The point is, they are also due to our mental states, aren't they? They are dependent on the mind. That's why Shantideva said there's nothing to fear in the three realms apart from the negative mind, because that is the thing that creates our environment and creates our whole perception of it.

Relationship between karmic actions and lower realms

There is quite a long explanation in Chapter 10 of Lama Tsongkhapa's *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path* with many descriptive pages about the lower realms. Given that Tsongkhapa wrote these descriptions in the 14th century, they have a very medieval flavor to them. Like all phenomena that come into existence in dependence upon causes and conditions, it's only logical that the lower realms would be evolving moment to moment and keeping up with the times. So when you hear some of these descriptions, keep in mind that the way in which these realms are experienced currently may be updated and a little different than how they were experienced in the 14th century. Ven. Thubten Chodron describes them just enough to give us a sense of how the experiences of these realms relate to the destructive actions that are the cause for them.

The eight hot hells

1. Reviving hell

The beings in this hell assemble and hack each other with various weapons that appear one by one through the force of their karma, until they swoon and fall to the ground. Then a voice from the sky commands, "Revive!" And they rise up again, hack each other as before, and experience measureless suffering.

So, what kind of beings would be born in this kind of hell? Soldiers who kill one another in battle? It sounds a lot like experiencing combat in a war situation. You think the battle is all over for you, but then your combat commander shouts, "Keep going!" and you have to keep fighting and killing, fighting and killing. Being a soldier who experiences the horrific blood lust that can occur in battle and the very real resulting trauma of that, can create the karma to be born in that kind of hell.

2. Black line hell

Black lines are used to mark the bodies of the living beings born there into quarters, eighths, and many other smaller divisions. The beings experience being split and chopped along these lines with weapons. What kind of beings are born here? Butchers? People who hack apart others' bodies, or torture others in a similar kind of way?

3. Crushing hell

In the crushing hell, beings are chased into very narrow valleys and then they are crushed. They are crushed by things falling on them. This could be the kind of hell for beings who have a very strong habit of hunting and killing animals, or humans, or other kinds of living beings, *and* enjoying it. You can see the relationship between the action and the karmic appearance somebody has as a result of that action.

4. Howling hell

Here you're chased into a house made of burning iron that then starts to close in on you and you get squished in the middle of it. Ven. Thubten Chodron says this is the result of being severely addicted to intoxicants, alcohol, narcotic drugs, and things like that. It's like the mind is getting trapped and squished.

5. *Great howling hell*

This is similar to the Howling Hell, except that the beings are inside two iron houses, one within the other. So the mind is trapped and squished with twice the force.

6. *Hot hell*

Beings are boiled in blazing iron kettles filled with molten copper. They are boiled alive and speared at the same time. This is a result of throwing animals or others into hot, boiling water, like when lobsters are boiled alive. We might think it's perfectly okay, but how do think the lobsters feel?

7. *Extremely hot hell*

This is like the hot hell but with more boiling, more blazing fire, more spears, and more torture.

8. *Unrelenting hell*

Beings are burned alive and tortured in different ways over and over. Again this is the result of having tortured and killed others regularly. There are living beings, including humans, that do this kind of thing.

The eight cold hells

They say the cause for rebirth in the cold hells is the frozen attitude of closed-mindedness, stubbornly clinging on to wrong views. Like when our mind gets stuck in a cynical attitude, or a really skeptical attitude; our minds are just stuck and frozen in our own wrong views, so it creates the karma to be born in the frozen hell.

The four neighboring hells

After your karma for the hot hells and cold hells is used up, there are four surrounding or neighboring hells that you have to go through to get out. In one of these neighboring hells, there's a tree, and the leaves of the tree are knives. You hear somebody you are very attached to, calling out to you from the top of the tree. You are trying desperately to climb up this tree, and the leaves that are made of knives and facing down, plunge into you. Thorns on the bark stick into you. When you finally get up there, of course it's a complete hallucination. Then you hear their voice down at the bottom of the tree. Again, chasing after the object of attachment, you start going down and all the knife-leaves turn and the blades face up, so you get impaled as you go down.

This is attachment. Wherever you try and go, when your mind is stuck in attachment, you get cut—an external karmic reflection of what is going on internally.

Hungry ghost realm

In the hungry ghost realm, there is a wide variety of hungry ghosts—some of them are helpful spirits, some of them are harmful spirits, and some of them are beings who are completely tortured by severe hunger and thirst their whole lives.

Attachment

Whereas extreme, violent anger is one of the chief motivating factors to cause one to be born in the hell realm because the hell realm is so violent, in the hungry ghost realm, which is characterized by clinging and its consequent frustration, it is attachment that's the main cause of being born there. Again, the mind just gets stuck. With one type of being in this realm, the mind is so stuck that its body has a huge enormous stomach, a very long thin neck that is tied in knots and the being is continually hungry and thirsty. Even if this kind of hungry ghost stands in front of a crystal clear lake, they can't see water. Or even if they have a vision of water in the distance and they run for it because they are so desperate to drink, as soon as they get there, it appears to their mind as pus and blood. This is because the karmic obscuration is so strong that the mind can't see. This kind of rebirth shows us how karma can obscure our mind and we can't see what's in front of our nose.

We can see that, too, in our own lives. We've probably all had some experiences in which we perceived a situation one way and only years later did we look back and say, "Wow, I really put myself in so much misery by looking at it like that." We can think of times in our life when our frame of reference, our

karmic obscuration was so strong that we created our own suffering. We can't even see what's there. Like when somebody is trying to be kind to us, and all we see is somebody interfering in our lives. This is what the hungry ghost realm is like. There are many different kinds of ghosts and spirits in this realm, not just the beings with huge stomachs and long thin necks.

We can see how this realm is just what it's like when we're stuck in attachment. When our minds are fixated with attachment, we can't see what's actually there. We project onto the object of our attachment qualities that it doesn't actually have. We always feel frustration because we can't seem to get whatever it is we want out of the object. So whatever we get, it isn't enough. It's like getting just one drop of water, but we're *so* thirsty. We want more. Or somehow we *do* get what we want, but then we twist it, and again it makes us miserable.

So, being stuck in attachment is one of the chief causes for being born in the hungry ghost realm. And of course refusing food to people, being stingy, hoarding food, and other similar actions can cause that kind of rebirth.

Miserliness

Miserliness is another one of the chief causes for taking a rebirth in the hungry ghost realm. For example, miserliness with material things, or miserliness with the Dharma, or our learning. In other words, if somebody wants to learn something from us, and we don't want to share what we've learned. Or we don't want to share the Dharma with somebody who is interested in it. We are miserly, we are threatened by somebody else knowing as much as we do. That also creates the cause for rebirth as a hungry ghost. It's said that knowing the Dharma intellectually but ignoring cause and effect can be a cause for rebirth in this realm. They even say that some of the spirits born in the hungry ghost realm can be excellent debaters. They can even know all the Dharma vocabulary.

Animal realm

The general sufferings of animals are the suffering of heat and cold, getting eaten by each other, getting tortured and getting hunted by human beings and other animals. Animals experience all sorts of suffering. Consider some of the ways that laboratory animals are treated. Or farm animals, the chickens and the cows, and how they are treated sometimes. We certainly wouldn't want to give up *our* body to feed somebody else, and yet the animals do that and they are given no choice about it. So, it really can be quite an unfortunate rebirth. They have very little control over their own destiny.

The general cause for an animal rebirth is the foggy mind and close-minded bewilderment we spoke about earlier. Ven. Thubten Chodron says that another reason for being born in the animal realm is lacking respect for people and things that are virtuous and good. In other words, out of our ignorance, mistreating or ignoring the virtues of other beings and things. We can see how this kind of mind is very ignorant—when virtue and goodness can actually cause a sense of aversion in someone.

Another possible cause for an animal rebirth is blind indulgence in very animal-like behavior. You can see that some human beings act worse than animals. If we have a hard time imagining human beings being born as animals, just look at how some human beings act although they have a human body. Some of them really act worse than animals, so it doesn't seem like that big of a jump to get a body that matches their mental state, does it?

Reflections on the lower realms

Breaking bad habits

It's very helpful to spend some time thinking about this. It might not be pleasant, but it's very sobering and it can stimulate our practice of the Dharma; to get us to think, again, about where we are going in our life and what the purpose or function of our life is. It can be a very strong motivator to break some of our bad habits.

Generating compassion

By thinking about this, it can also help us to generate compassion for all the other living beings who are

experiencing these lower realms or who are creating the causes to experience them. Sometimes we see people doing horrendous, harmful actions and we get angry at them. We get angry at world leaders for making decisions that result in the suffering and killing of so many people. If we understand karma and if we look at some of these world leaders and the karma they are creating and the suffering that they will experience as a result, then even though we can't condone what they have done, we can get a sense of compassion for them, being so confused that they create suffering for others and themselves thinking that they are somehow doing the right thing.

If we understand these kinds of things, it helps us to prevent getting angry at people who act negatively because we understand how they are creating their own suffering. By having some compassionate feeling for them, we will care more about them, and maybe intervene a little bit to try and help them to stop.

Energizing us to practice

By thinking about the lower realms, it gives us some energy to really use our human mind, while we have it now, for something constructive besides watching TV and surfing the internet. For example, when we encounter animals, instead of just thinking how sweet, or cute, or beautiful and interesting they are, if we try to put ourselves in the animal's place, we can really start to think about what it would be like to have that animal's rebirth. Again it helps us to connect to that being, to generate compassion for them, and it helps us appreciate our present potential and possibility.

Seeking refuge

From thinking about the sufferings of the lower realms, we do get an uncomfortable feeling. Often that feeling comes when we start to look at the karma we've created throughout our life, when we start to think of the consequences of it. We get a very uncomfortable feeling and we want to do something about it. We want a method to follow so that we can purify, so that we can stop creating that karma. We want some guidance and practice. And that's why the meditation on refuge comes next, because when we begin to see that we aren't in a nice, stable, secure position, we could die at anytime and we do have negative imprints on our mind-stream, then we start to seek refuge and we begin to search out those who can guide us. And so we start thinking about why the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are a reliable refuge and how they can guide us and how we can follow them.

We shouldn't just think about the sufferings of the lower realms and then sit there with this horrible feeling in the pit of our stomach. Instead, we should use that feeling to take refuge with a mind of strong confidence in the ability of the Buddha-Dharma-Sangha to guide us. That makes our practice quite strong, and it cuts away a lot of our pride. Pride is a big hindrance on the path.

In the next *Lam Rim* topic we'll talk about refuge, why we take it and how to relate to the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha; what the advantages are of taking refuge, and the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, so we can better understand what they are and how to relate to them.