

# ***LAM RIM: The Basis of all Good Qualities***

The following teaching was given by Geshe Dhonam as part of a Lam Rim Retreat at Trashi Gomang Buddhist Centre in Auckland, New Zealand, on 7 April, 2019, and translated by Celia Smith. Reference texts are *The Basis of All Good Qualities* and *The Precious Master's Instructions* by Je Rinpoche, and *Liberation in the Palm of your Hand* by Pabongka Rinpoche

We are looking at the *Basis of All Good Qualities*. The text is by Je Rinpoche who composed many Lam Rim texts, and among these, *The Basis of all Good Qualities* is one that is very brief and yet covers the complete Lam Rim topic including tantra. It is a glance meditation on the complete path, and as such is an extremely good text. In reviewing it today, we will only be doing it in brief as we only have a short time. Je Rinpoche included the most important points within this text.

[Refer to the copy of *The Precious Master's Instructions*. On page 13 are listed the four parts of the exposition of the stages of the path to enlightenment, and we are looking on page 14 at the fourth part: 'How to guide disciples by the actual teaching', and the first part under this heading is 'How to rely on spiritual masters, the root of the path.']

The first verse of *The Basis of all Good Qualities* begins with reliance on the spiritual friend:

**Our kind and venerable spiritual master is the  
foundation of all good qualities. Seeing that dependence  
on him is the root of the path, may I rely on him with  
great respect and continuous effort – inspire me thus.**

In general, as it says in the overall categories, the kind and venerable master is the root of the path; and under that come extensive meditations on the two parts – how to rely on thought and how to rely on action. There's a great deal of detail that we won't be going into now. But the essence of it is in this verse.

The first verse relates to the first part of the fourth category [in *The Precious Master's Instructions*, page 14] and the second part of that category is 'Having relied on them, how to progressively train your mind', which begins with considering freedom & endowment as a human.

Having attained a human body we inspire ourselves to take the essence (full advantage) of our freedom & endowment; and the way to take that essence is by realising that having attained a human body and met the dharma we have all the favourable conditions. This is expressed in the second verse of *The Basis of all Good Qualities*.

**A human life with leisure is obtained this once.  
Understanding that it has great value and is hard to find,  
may I produce unceasingly the mind that takes hold of  
its essence, day and night – inspire me thus.**

While in previous lives we have definitely attained (other) human lives, compared with the number of rebirths we've experienced in the lower realms, these are comparatively few, and we

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have had many more lives in the lower realms. It is therefore ‘as if’ this human life we have right now is attained just once. Realising this, we determine not to waste it and not to act just for the benefit of this lifetime – rather to accomplish benefit for future lives and for the purposes of all sentient beings. The essence of this verse is to practise the dharma in order to accomplish the benefit of future human lives.

When we are in retreat and feeling tired or things are difficult, it is said to be useful to read again and again on freedom & endowment, and on impermanence, because this helps us to generate courage and determination and overcome those difficulties. For example, today we are staying in retreat for the whole day, practising the dharma, meditating and so on. We are not wasting this day – it is an extremely good and beneficial thing we are doing.

There are three stages of ‘taking full advantage’ or the essence – that of the initial being, the intermediate being and the great being.

The first is the common path of the initial being (‘the path shared with lesser beings’ in *The Precious Master’s Instructions*.) It is called a ‘common’ path because at this stage we are not doing this practice alone. There are other reasons for referring to it as ‘the common path’ that we won’t go into now. This stage has two parts: cultivating concern for future lives, and relying on the methods of happiness in future lives.

Under the first part ‘cultivating concern for future lives’: if we never think about future lives but only focus on this life alone, we will waste our time and actions. Future lives are far-reaching and long-term, and this is a very important point. As explained in the Lam Rim texts, to turn our minds to future lives we think of impermanence and the lower realm, which brings us to the next verse:

**The fluctuation of our body and life is like a bubble of water;  
remember death, for we perish so quickly. After death  
the effects of black and white karma pursue us as a shadow  
follows a body. Finding certainty in this, may I always  
be careful to abandon even the slightest negative action, and  
to complete the accumulation of virtue – inspire me thus.**

‘The fluctuation of our body and life is like a bubble of water; remember death, for we perish so quickly’ recalls impermanence and cultivating concern for future lives. ‘After death the effects of black and white karma pursue us as a shadow follows a body’ recalls concern for the methods to attain happiness in future lives. Together these encompass the complete practice of the initial being. The risk is that in future lives we will fall to the lower realms. In order to prevent this, we generate certainty as regards cause (action) and effect. By being careful in regards to action and effect – by accomplishing virtue wherever we can and avoiding non-virtue – we create the forces to again attain freedom & endowment as a human.

If in addition to this we are able to take refuge, then that is excellent. If it occurs that we accumulate non-virtue, we quickly engage in purification – this is also an important part. This is accomplished in the remaining lines of this verse: ‘... the effects of black and white karma pursue us as a shadow follows a body. Finding certainty in this, may I always be careful to abandon even

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the slightest negative action, and to complete the accumulation of virtue.’ In the same way that the shadow is always present with the body, after death the karma we have accumulated goes with us, and therefore we perform the purification of negativity and accomplishing virtue as we are able.

In these common paths of the initial being, abiding well within the advice of action and effect encompasses, we understand the characteristics of karma – in general and in its individual characteristics – and generate certainty in this and having well understood it. Then, as much as we are able, we avoid creating even the smallest negative karmas, and as much as we are able, accomplish the smallest of virtues. If we are able to create a great virtue, that is good, but there are many factors such as the strength of motivation and so forth. However, if we have created non-virtuous karma, then we should engage in purification, applying the four opponent powers (of regret, refuge, remedy & restraint); determination to turn away from the action; the Vajrasattva 100-syllable mantra and so forth to purify. These are the important points in the initial beings’ practice.

Our accumulation of non-virtuous action can arise through the power of familiarity or through the meeting of various conditions, and for those reasons we can end up accumulating non-virtuous karma. Through purification we decrease the strength of the imprints placed on our minds so they may not ripen in future lives. As it says in the lines, ‘finding certainty in this, may I always be certain to abandon even the slightest negative action, and to complete the accumulation of virtue.’ This is the end of the initial beings’ practice.

The second stage is the common path of the intermediate being. Remember within the experience of taking a human life that we have the initial beings’ path, the intermediate beings’ path and the great beings’ path; these terms are not to do with the size of the body. They refer to the thoughts. The small (initial) being is motivated by their own life and by seeking happiness within cyclic existence. The intermediate being is still concerned with their own life but sees the faults of cyclic existence and wishes to be liberated from cyclic existence and attain liberation. And that thought will then link to the great beings’ path.

The intermediate being is developing an aspiration to liberation, and seeking to establish the nature of the path leading to liberation. When we train our minds in the stages of the common path of the intermediate being, there are two parts: developing aspiration for liberation; and establishing the path that leads to liberation. For the aspiration to liberation we need to first think of our lives within cyclic existence – whether we’re happy or not. And we reflect and see that there are many sufferings, many difficulties in cyclic existence, and therefore we determine to become free of cyclic existence, to attain liberation. And then, secondly, we look at the methods of attaining liberation – the actual causes.

To generate the wish to attain liberation, we look at the drawbacks of cyclic existence. These are contained in all Lam Rim texts – the eight sufferings, the six categories of suffering, or the three. The text we are looking at focuses principally on the six sufferings. We could also reflect on the eight types of suffering within cyclic existence: the sufferings of birth, sickness, aging and death and so forth – in *The Great Lam Rim* text each of these is explained in detail.

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**There is no satisfaction in enjoying worldly pleasures.  
They are the door to all misery. Having realised that the fault  
of samsaric perfections is that they cannot be trusted, may I  
be strongly intent on the bliss of liberation – inspire me thus.**

There is no satisfaction. No matter how much happiness or what excellences of cyclic existence we attain, we are not satisfied. ‘The door to all misery’ refers to taking rebirth again and again; to entering the womb and taking rebirth again and again. Then ‘they cannot be trusted, they are not reliable’ means, again, that however much happiness is attained, it will come to an end. Attainments are uncertain and there is no enduring happiness within them. So this encompasses the points that we abandon our body again and again; whatever excellences or pleasures we attain are short-lived and not reliable; however good or bad our body is, it will be abandoned. There is no certainty to the happiness attained during cyclic existence. As regards our friends: no matter how many we have or how good they are we will leave them all behind. So all these things are unreliable and untrustworthy.

Then the next verse completes the practice of the intermediate being, the first part of which was aspiring to liberation by seeing the nature of cyclic existence, and this second part, of generating the wish to become free of cyclic existence by looking to the methods of liberation. To become free of cyclic existence we look to the methods of liberation. The principal causes of liberation are the three higher trainings, and of these, the most important higher training is wisdom. This is because the root of cyclic existence is ignorance, and what is obscured is the understanding of the nature of phenomena. Therefore one needs to generate the wisdom that understands the nature of phenomena, the wisdom that realises emptiness. But while this higher training is the most important, it must be preceded by generating the higher training of concentration, and the higher training of concentration must be generated by the higher training in ethics. Through the higher training in ethics one has many more opportunities for generating concentration. So we come to the next verse:

**That pure thought (to attain liberation) produces  
great conscientiousness, mindfulness and awareness.  
May I make the essential practice, keeping the vows of  
individual liberation, the root of the doctrine – inspire me thus.**

The pure thought is the aspiration to liberation, and the higher training that is the focus here is the training in ethics. (This text places the higher trainings of concentration and wisdom on the path of the great beings.) So the focus in this verse is ethics: the essential practice is keeping the vows either by abandoning the ten non-virtues or, if one has them, by keeping the vows of individual liberation, the root of the doctrine.

This completes the intermediate beings’ path and then we go on to the stages of the great beings’ path. In general, looking back at the initial beings’ stages of practice, if one was to do that alone while seeking benefit for future lives, one would indeed attain a good rebirth. But even with a good rebirth there are many sufferings in cyclic existence. For intermediate beings there is *less* suffering, but unless one attains liberation one will continue to experience the suffering of cyclic existence – undergoing birth, sickness, aging and death. And this is the same for all sentient

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beings – self and all other beings. Exactly the same. So we come to the stages of practice of the great beings. One becomes aware that there are other sentient beings who have been very kind to oneself; that to attain liberation for oneself alone would be wrong. And therefore one trains in bodhicitta to accomplish the benefits for all sentient beings, to liberate them from cyclic existence.

Training in bodhicitta is achieved (1) by practising six cause and one effect, (2) by equalising and exchanging oneself and others, or (3) by a combination of these two, which we have talked about previously. These are very important practices, and the verse itself expresses the thought that aspires to this ‘supreme altruistic intention’:

**Having seen that all beings, my kind mothers, have fallen  
like myself into the ocean of cyclic existence, may I train  
in the supreme altruistic intention, assuming the obligation to  
free all migrating beings – inspire me thus.**

To briefly recap the first of these practices – six cause and one effect – one generates equanimity and equal regard to all sentient beings, and then reflects on them having been one’s mother – there is no being that has not been one’s mother at some stage. And on recalling their kindness (as one’s mother) and thinking of the circumstances these sentient beings are now in, to think to repay their kindness with the long term goal to accomplish the ultimate liberation of Buddhahood. One then goes on to reflect on love, and the mind that wishes for all sentient beings to abide in happiness – not just (the) temporary happiness (of cyclic existence) but an enduring happiness. Compassion that wishes them to be free of suffering and then the supreme thought where one determines to take responsibility to bring all beings to enlightenment. But if one does not oneself attain enlightenment, then it remains very difficult to bring others to liberation or Buddhahood. But if one’s self attains Buddhahood, then one’s ability to benefit others will be far greater. So with this thought, one determines to definitely attain Buddhahood oneself and through this to bring all other sentient beings to enlightenment and liberation.

The second method of generating bodhicitta is equalising self and others, seeing that self and others are identical in not wanting suffering, and that all others wish for happiness and do not wish for suffering, just like oneself. While the focus of six cause and one effect is recognising all beings as ones mother and thinking of their kindness; one equalises and exchanges oneself and others by seeing that all beings are exactly the same as oneself – wanting happiness and not wanting suffering – and then generate the thought to exchange oneself for others, and generate a very strong determination and bodhicitta. Having generated bodhicitta one must then focus on cultivating the associated actions. Simply to think for the benefit of other sentient beings and wanting them to attain Buddhahood is not enough. One needs to engage in the actions of a bodhisattva – not simply meditating on bodhicitta but training in the actions of a bodhisattva. And this brings us to the next verse:

**Generating the altruistic intention alone, without cultivation  
of the three ethical practices, does not lead to enlightenment.  
Having realised this, may I practise with intense effort the vows  
of the conquerors and their spiritual children – inspire me thus.**

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Having generated the awakening mind one then engages in the three ethical practices: the ethics of gathering virtue; the ethics of refraining from faults against one's vows; and the ethics of accomplishing the benefit of sentient beings. The ethics of gathering virtue encompasses all the other six perfections – generosity, patience, joyous effort, meditation (or concentration), and wisdom.

So having achieved the spirit of enlightenment – bodhicitta – one trains in the Bodhisattva's practices and this training has two parts: the first is training in the practices in general; and the verse 'Generating the altruistic intention alone ...' referred to the first part of training in the Bodhisattva practices: training in general.

Then the second part is training in the last two perfections in particular. [And we recall the point that Geshe-la made earlier, that the last two perfections – concentration and wisdom – will fit later within the great beings path.] The next verse covers the second part: the training in the perfections of meditation (or concentration) and wisdom:

**By quieting distraction to false objects, and analysing  
the meaning of reality, may I quickly generate within  
my mind stream the path uniting calm abiding  
and special insight – inspire me thus.**

So 'quieting distraction to false objects' refers to cultivating the higher training of concentration: we cease distraction and overcome the wandering distracted and lethargic mind. And 'analysing the meaning of reality' refers to generating an understanding of emptiness. And combined together they produce the uniting of calm abiding and special insight. They are achieved together – we cultivate calm abiding (the perfection of concentration or meditation) and then combine it by generating penetrative insight (the perfection of wisdom).

The next verse is a request to enter the Vajrayana or tantric vehicle when one has trained in these paths – (the initial, intermediate and great beings' paths) which are common to both sutra and tantra:

**When trained in the common path, I am a suitable  
vessel, let me enter with ease the great gateway of  
the fortunate ones, the Vajrayana, the highest  
of all vehicles – inspire me thus.**

In brief Je Rinpoche has explained the condensed nature of the path as renunciation, bodhicitta and ultimate view, and by becoming familiar with the path one is able to enter the supreme vajra vehicle. But to practice the swift path it must be preceded by the common paths, otherwise the practice of the swift path does not become stable. And to 'enter the gateway' i.e. gain initiation, is a great fortune for those of great merit. So 'having trained in the common path' one takes initiation and associated with this one receives associated commitments and vows, which one determines to keep as well.

The 'two powerful attainments' or siddhis within the tantric vehicle depend on keeping the vows and commitments one has made.

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**The basis of achieving the two powerful attainments  
is the pure vows and commitments that I have pledged.  
Having found true understanding of this, may I keep them  
even at the cost of my life – inspire me thus.**

“The basis of achieving the two powerful attainments’ refers to the common or uncommon (supreme) siddhis or attainments. The supreme siddhi refers to the attaining of Buddhahood and the common siddhis refer to the eight abilities. And what follows from this is taking initiation, keeping the vows and engaging in training in the generation and completion stages of tantra:

**Having realised the significance of the two stages, which  
are the essence of the tantric path, may I steadfastly practise  
without laziness, the four sessions of yoga, and realise  
what the holy beings have taught – inspire me thus.**

We enter and train in the tantric path not just because it is a swift path but also because one is not able to attain Buddhahood by relying on the sutric path alone Why? Because the most subtle levels of obscurations to knowing must be abandoned through tantric practice, through the great blissful wisdom realised by the most subtle mind. And through that, one can abandon the most subtle obscurations to knowing that cannot be abandoned simply by meditating on emptiness with the gross mind.

The two verses after this are a prayer:

**May the spiritual teachers who lead me on the sacred path,  
and all spiritual friends who practise it have long life.  
May I quickly and completely pacify all outer and  
inner hindrances – grant such inspiration I pray.**

**In all my rebirths may I never be separated from  
perfect spiritual masters and enjoy the magnificent Dharma.  
Completing all qualities of the stages and paths,  
may I quickly achieve the stage of Vajradhara.**

This text up to this point has covered the trainings of the beings of the graduated path; and it then enters the highest yogic tantric path through attaining initiation. We then meditate on it, cultivate the recitation of the sadhanas, and self-generation.

And through this prayer we place on our minds the imprints of the entire path.

End