

Reflections on Impermanence and Transcendent Renunciation

Preface - A letter to a friend

Dear one, here are a few readings I've used over the years to encourage myself to cultivate the path, and to let go of lesser enjoyments and motivations.

You may have heard how meditations on impermanence are an integral part of the Stages of the Path. They do lead to letting go, when we sense that there is a greater happiness, that is freedom. This all happens organically, and can't be forced, so please be patient and gentle with yourself. Everything happens in its own time.

A lot of our problems and sufferings come from seeing things in a mistaken way. As I understand it, this is what the whole of Buddhism aims to resolve. By studying and practicing, we learn to see things as they are, and gradually our experience changes. We can become more free and at ease, and more fulfilled. This has been my experience, to some extent. As I said, I'm still a work in progress, so you can take what is in these pages as a reflection of where I am these days with the teachings. Hopefully they will be useful to you as well.

In what I sent along to you this week, on Revisiting the Jhanas, I mentioned what the Sri Lankan teacher Bhante Gunaratana suggested, as far as letting go, thinking of it as something temporary, and provisional, so that we can settle more deeply and more comfortably in meditation. This is something we all can experience. It makes more space.

Seeing letting go as provisional, and also seeing it as a more long term aim go together. They support each other. All along the way, I've found, these meditations on mortality, impermanence and death bring great benefit. From time to time I like to read and reflect on the verses that have meant the most to me. When I do this I notice almost right away that I'm a lot

more grateful, more patient and gentle, more generous, and clear minded about what is truly important in life. It changes my felt sense of priorities. It's really something. Perhaps you will find this in your own life as well.

In response to your questions lately about the romantic character, and letting go, I'd like to offer you this. You are welcome to reflect on any of these selections that you find useful. Let me know what is helpful and meaningful to you.

One special note: The next to the last selection, on this precious human life, is from an excellent book that I'm reading just now, called Steps on the Path to Enlightenment, by Geshe Sopa. He was one of Lama Yeshe's esteemed teachers. This is from volume one of a five volume set of books, that are a commentary on Lama Je Tsong Khapa's Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment.

When I said I think I understand you, it's because we do have a similar temperament, and also because we are the same in some ways. We both have these same challenges, and opportunities, and are both connected in some wonderful ways to the Dharma and to excellent teachers.

Please know that I'm very grateful for our friendship, and for all the kind encouragement you've given me over the years.

May you have every happiness, peace and fulfillment.

Jason.

Reflections on Impermanence and Transcendent Renunciation

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From The Transference of Consciousness at the Time of Death,
by Lama Yeshe

All relationships are transitory, even the rather special relationships between Dharma brothers and sisters, and grasping at such relationships is obviously a great hinderance to our practice. We must understand that as soon as we have met someone, the cause for our eventual splitting up has been created. Meeting always leads to separation; if we investigate our own experiences we shall see that this is true.

No matter how much pleasure we receive from someone or something, the time will come when our connection with that person or thing will be no more. It does not require too much reflection to see that this is true.

Everything is momentary, and when the actual time of death comes none of the people or things we have met with can help us at all. Worse than that, not only do they fail to help us but, because of our attachment to them, they also create great problems for us.

That is why it is important to prepare ourselves now. By practicing the awareness of impermanence and death we should at least realize that there is no reason for hanging on to things the way we do. At the very least, we should gain this realization. By training ourselves in the awareness of impermanence and preparing ourselves for death we become more easy-going. We can learn to accept the impermanent nature of our lives, our relationships and so forth.

When you have an awareness of impermanence and death, your attitude towards life becomes more easy-going and realistic. And if you can learn to accept the death of your loved ones as something natural, then these teachings will have been successful.

The Realization of Impermanence and Death is the Source of Happiness in Life, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

One of the fundamental problems in our life is the concept of permanence, apprehending these phenomena - which are in the nature of impermanence - as permanent. We ourselves, our own life, our body, enemy, friend and stranger, the sense objects and so forth - all these things are in the nature of perishing, in the nature of changing within every second and can be stopped at any time.

However, we apprehend them all the time as permanent, as unchangeable. We apprehend that they will last, that they will be like this all the time. They are like this now and they will be always like this, forever. By incorrectly apprehending how they exist, we think, "I will have these things forever. I will have these possessions, I will have these friends, I will have this and that." We think that they will continue to exist, that they're going to be like this all the time, as it is now.

We live our life with this concept of permanence, looking at these things in a way that is not true, believing in it. Looking at these things in the wrong way, seeing things that don't exist as existent, is a hallucination; this is not reality...

This concept of permanence becomes the basis for the dissatisfied mind, attachment, anger and so forth to arise. This concept of permanence becomes the basis of life's problems, the basis of life's pain. It's the basis of relationship problems, loneliness and so forth...

All these things are based on this, the wrong conception, the concept of permanence, looking at these things in the wrong way, in a way that doesn't exist.

On the other hand, practicing awareness, living our life with awareness, with right understanding, brings freedom. It releases us from the confused mind, the afflicted mind, from the discriminating thought, anger, attachment, ignorance and the concept of permanence...

As soon as we reflect on impermanence, desire, the dissatisfied mind, stops immediately. Because of that, immediately there's peace in our heart, there's happiness or relaxation in our heart.

If we really want freedom, if we really want liberation, we need to practice the awareness of this.

From *How to Meditate on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, by
Pabongkha Dechen Nyingpo

Let us shift now to the spiritual domain, where the aim is to increase an experiential awareness of different virtuous minds, by repeatedly contemplating the various reasons that will elicit them...

What you must do here is contemplate over and over again the most penetrating of scriptural citations and arguments, and in particular those arguments that are the most effective for eliciting a spiritual transformation within your mind.

There are many people who study and talk about Dharma, but never really practice it. Their Dharma is only words. This is because they have not spent sufficient time meditating on death.

- Geshe Dhargyey

Why is your mind not subdued, why have you not had any realizations of the path to enlightenment and why have all your daily activities- eating, walking, sitting, sleeping, working and, of course, meditating and studying Dharma- *not* become Dharma, even though you have so much knowledge and know so many things that your mind is full? *It is all because of one mistake- not thinking about impermanence and death.*

Because of not reflecting on impermanence and death, no matter how much meditation or retreat you do and no matter how much Dharma you study, nothing becomes Dharma. None of your virtuous activities become holy Dharma. Therefore, there is no question that all your ordinary activities of eating, walking, sitting, sleeping and working do not become Dharma. Everything becomes worldly dharma but not holy Dharma. It is like that.

- From Cutting the Concept of Permanence, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

From Death and the Bodhisattva Trainings, by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama

We practitioners who are on the initial stages of development should first think about how to make firm the foundations of the path.

The early Kadam masters always cultivated these preliminary meditations: the preciousness and rarity of human life; death and impermanence; the karmic laws of cause and effect; the shortcomings of unenlightened existence; and the nature of taking refuge and entering the spiritual path.

Until the basis is laid, forget about grasping at the higher practices, which are beyond our present abilities. Once the foundations are secure, the higher teachings become meaningful.

From Brief Recitations for the Four Preliminary Practices

by the 17th Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje

*This precious human body,
so hard to get and easy to lose.
I shall make this life meaningful!*

*The world and living beings are impermanent.
Our lives in particular are like water bubbles-
who knows when we will die and become corpses?
Since only the Dharma will help then, I'll practice diligently.*

*There is no freedom at the time of death.
In order to take control over karma,
I will give up misdeeds and always do virtuous acts.
Thinking thus, I examine myself every day.*

*The places, friends, pleasures, and riches of samsara,
are always stricken with the three sufferings;
They're like a feast before being led to execution.
Cutting the ties of attachment, I'll strive and reach enlightenment...*

From The Eighth Dalai Lama's Prayer

This precious human body is an ornament with every beauty.
May I live in awareness of its precious nature -
How it is hard to obtain and is easily lost -
And, never distracted by the superficial things of this life,
Always strive to extract its inner essence.

Body, possessions, and even cherished friends and dear ones
Are illusory, like the objects of a dream.
May I maintain awareness of how they are impermanent and illusory,
And always live as though at the threshold of death.

May I arouse the mind that is apprehensive of the sufferings
Of the three lower realms of rebirth most difficult to bear,
And be inspired to train in the ways of karmic law,
And thus gain freedom from lower rebirth forever.

No matter where one wanders in the three worlds -
From the highest heaven to the lowest of hells -
One finds only all-pervading dissatisfaction.
May I transcend it all and find
That firm ground of liberation and spiritual joy.

Practice in Stages, by Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden, from The Path to Enlightenment in Tibetan Buddhism

Practice in Stages. While meditating on the lower subjects, the aspirations for higher subjects should be strengthened. While listening to the teachings on the higher subjects, your intention to practice the lower ones should also be strengthened. If it goes like this, you are practicing properly. On the other hand, if, while listening to higher teachings, your interest in the lower ones wanes, you will end up practicing in a vacuum, with no proper basis or support.

If your guru devotion weakens, resort strongly to reflecting on the benefits of guru devotion, and generate a clear view of how it is the root of the path.

If your aspiration for the Dharma weakens, you must focus on the aspects of leisure and fortune to discern clearly the purpose and real value of your life.

If you succumb to strong attachment to the allurements of the pleasures of this life, focus your attention on impermanence to dispel this attitude.

Becoming neglectful of your vows indicates indifference to the results of actions, so direct yourself to the study of karma.

If your revulsion toward cyclic existence is weak, discussing liberation is mere words. You must reflect again and again on the disadvantages of cyclic existence.

If you lack a strong compulsion to benefit others, you have severed the root of the Mahayana, so you must direct yourself to the contemplation of bodhicitta and its basis - great compassion.

If, having taken the bodhisattva vows and engaged in the Perfections, you find that your mind strongly adheres to appearances as real, you must direct your attention to contemplating space-like emptiness, and see all that appears as like an illusion. Focus on the non-dual nature of appearances and emptiness.

If your mind continues to wander uncontrollably from the virtuous object of meditation and remains a slave to the objects of the senses, emphasize calm abiding to bring it under control.

Take each subject from guru devotion to special insight and make it your meditation object for a week at a time. Then start over once more at the beginning and repeat the cycle again and again. In this way you will progressively deepen your understanding of each subject, while, at the same time, keep the whole path in mind.

From Gates to Buddhist Practice, by Chagdud Rinpoche

We must instill in ourselves an ongoing, moment-by-moment awareness of impermanence. For life is a race against death and the time of death is unknown.

Contemplating the approach of death changes our priorities and helps us let go of our obsession with ordinary involvements. If we always remain aware that each moment might be our last, we will intensify our practice in order not to waste or misuse our precious human opportunity...

Suppose we start with a very simple exercise. Examine the importance you place on the food you eat, your clothes, your house, your friends, your conversations, the books you read. You'll probably find that you hold them to be so crucial you work night and day to maintain them.

Now examine these things differently. Look at each in turn and ask yourself whether it is permanent. Ask yourself whether it is something you can ultimately depend on. At the hour of your death and beyond, will it be reliable? And is it worth all the effort and concern that you devote to it now? Thinking about impermanence and death helps to cut through worldly values and changes your priorities.

Through contemplation and application of the teachings in each moment of your life, you will see your habits change. You won't change only by reading books. You must search and probe, question and examine. You may have already been exposed to all kinds of ideas and understood many things intellectually, but without contemplation that takes you deeper in your practice and allows you to reach some very fundamental conclusions, you won't be able to make the next step.

To discover what's really important to you, you could take a few minutes now to reflect on what's been said here and see how it relates to your own experience.

From A Torch Lighting the Way to Freedom, by Dudjom Rinpoche

The benefits of meditating day and night just on death and impermanence are said to be boundless. One sees that everything that appears is perishable and thereby gains a deep sense of nonattachment to outer objects. The fire of diligence in the performance of positive actions is set ablaze. One begins to feel an uncommon and heartfelt fear of the sufferings of cyclic existence.

From recognizing that at the time of death nothing can help one, one gives up the activities of this life. One uses one's body, speech, and mind to practice the Dharma, without taking even a moment of ordinary leisure. One sees how actions mature as results, and this gives rise to determination to be free and disenchantment.

As one knows that the time of death is unpredictable, one does not count on anything. Numerous virtues that one did not have before are born in one's mindstream. One stops believing things are eternal. One does not have attachment to friends and relations or hatred for enemies. One is constantly diligent in performing positive actions. One understands that (without proper understanding) life is a delusion. One completes the two accumulations of merit and wisdom, and so on.

The Nirvana Sutra says:

*Of all the various kinds of cultivation, reaping the autumn crop is the best;
Of all footprints, that of the elephant is the biggest;
Of all thoughts, that of impermanence and death is the greatest:
It stops all thoughts involved with the three worlds.*

From Renunciation, by Lama Yeshe

What can we do when our deep-rooted instincts encourage us to act in ways completely opposed to our ultimate benefit? With infinite wisdom and compassion, the enlightened beings have shown us the way to deliverance from this confusion. The way is meditation on the impermanence of phenomena, and meditation on death as expounded in The Graduated Path to Enlightenment.

By means of this meditation we can see how impermanence and death exist within us from the moment of birth. With sustained meditation we shall gradually develop intuitive awareness of this truth. As we become increasingly conscious of death's approach and of its inevitability, our compulsive grasping at illusory pleasures spontaneously subsides. It slowly dawns on us that all our lives we have been working hard in the expectation of achieving comfort and peace at some time in the future. And we remember the countless beings who have lived, trapped in a maze of unfulfilled hopes and expectations, only to die in disappointment and bitterness.

Even if you are not a great yogi with indestructible meditative powers, you should at least develop the simple but clear understanding that you were not born on this earth for the sole purpose of gratifying your sense desires. This understanding can generate a power of determination to give up attachment. This determination alone becomes the cause of your future liberation from suffering. When you reach that liberated state of consciousness even a catastrophe will not affect you. Inescapable disasters happen all the time in this troubled world. Each of us therefore has the responsibility of attaining for himself a level of consciousness conferring immunity to all hardships.

If we have deep understanding of impermanence and death, it's easy for us to control our attachment to things. Control comes naturally. I think that's a great example. Check up.

Therefore, you can see how effective understanding the nature of impermanence and death can be in helping you release clinging attachment to the sense world. Just as it comes naturally to the condemned man on the day of his death – he's not pretending; he really has no attachment to food, clothing or ornaments – in the same way, if you develop the wisdom understanding impermanence and death, you will spontaneously release the attachment that causes you agitation and conflict, and will easily control your mind.

- Lama Yeshe

Transcendent renunciation is developed by meditating on the preciousness of human life in terms of the ocean of evolutionary possibilities, the immediacy of death, the inexorability of evolutionary causality, and the sufferings of the ignorance-driven, involuntary life cycle.

Renunciation automatically occurs when you come face-to-face with your real existential situation, and so develop a genuine sympathy for yourself, having given up pretending the prison of habitual emotions and confusions is just fine.

Meditating on the teachings given on these themes in a systematic way enables you to generate quickly an ambition to gain full control of your body and mind in order at least to face death confidently, knowing you can navigate safely through the dangers of further journeys. Wasting time investing your life in purposes that “you cannot take with you” becomes ludicrous, and, when you radically shift your priorities, you feel a profound relief at unburdening yourself of a weight of worry over inconsequential things.

Padmasambhava - The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Book of Natural Liberation Through Understanding in the Between

Robert Thurman translation

Selected verses by Lama Je Tsong Khapa

From The Foundation of All Good Qualities

By understanding that the precious freedom of this rebirth is found only once, is greatly meaningful and difficult to find again, May I generate the mind that unceasingly, day and night, takes hold of its essence.

This life is as impermanent as a water bubble - how quickly it decays and death comes! And after death, just like a shadow follows the body, the results of black and white karma follow.

Finding firm and definite conviction in this, May I always be careful to abandon even the slightest negativities and accomplish all virtuous deeds.

Seeking samsaric pleasures is the door to all suffering. They are uncertain and cannot be relied on. Recognizing these shortcomings, May I generate the strong wish for the bliss of liberation.

From The Three Principle Aspects of the Path

3.

Without the definite intention to gain liberation,
there is no way to pacify the attraction to the pleasures of samsara.
By craving, beings are continuously bound.
Therefore, from the very beginning, seek liberation
{the happiness beyond samsara}

4.

Freedom and endowments are hard to find
This life is fleeting, its length is uncertain, and there is no time to waste
Gaining familiarity with this counters the attachment to this life's
pleasures;

And thinking again and again
about the nature of karma,
and about the sufferings of unenlightened existence,
counters the attachment to all future samsaric lives

5.

When, by having trained in that way,
there is no arising, even for a moment,
any attraction to worldly pleasures,
and, day and night, continuously,
the intuitive desire to seek liberation arises,
then you have truly generated the mind of renunciation,
the wish to be free

From Lines of Experience, Verses 10 through 13

10.

This human existence with its freedoms and opportunities
is more precious than a wish-granting jewel.
Obtained just this once, it is difficult to acquire and is easily lost;

Considering how one's own death can happen at any time,
and realizing that all worldly activities are as chaff,
you must try to extract its essence at all times, day and night.

I, the yogi, have practiced just that.
You who also seek liberation,
please cultivate yourself in the same way.

11.

After death,
there is no guarantee that you will not be reborn
in one of the three unfortunate realms,
but it is certain that the Three Jewels of Refuge
have the power to protect you from them.

For this reason,
your taking of refuge should be extremely solid,
and you should completely follow what this entails,
without ever letting your commitments weaken.

Moreover,
your success in Taking Refuge
depends on your considering thoroughly
which are the positive or the negative karmic actions

together with their results
and then living according to the guidelines
of what is to be adopted or rejected.

I, the yogi, have practiced just that.
You who also seek liberation,
please cultivate yourself in the same way.

12.

*The fullest strides of progress in actualizing the supreme paths
will not come about unless you have attained the working basis
of an ideal human body that is complete with qualities.

Therefore, you must cultivate the virtuous actions
that are the causes of a human birth.

Furthermore,
since it is essential to purify negative karma
and to remove your obstacles,
you should cherish continually devoting yourself
to applying the complete set of four opponent powers
that can accomplish this.

I, the yogi, have practiced just that.
You who also seek liberation,
please cultivate yourself in the same way.

13.

If you do not make an effort
to think about the nature of suffering,
you will not develop a keen interest to work for liberation.

If you do not consider its evolution,
you will not know the means
for cutting the root of this vicious circle.

Therefore,
you should cherish the renunciation of samsaric existence,
by knowing which factors bind you to its wheel.

I, the yogi, have practiced just that.
You who also seek liberation,
please cultivate yourself in the same way.

Verses of Advice for Meditating on Impermanence

by Konchok Tenpe Dronme (1762–1823)

Within the sky-sphere of marvelous, great bliss
your cloud-like forms gather to train sentient beings
showering down rains of teachings, profound and vast
to you, the holy gurus, I bow

This fortunate birth, which is obtained but once
is liable to slip from our grasp without bearing fruit -
so traverse the path to liberation while you can,
and for that, let this whip of advice spur you on!

Thoughts that we might finish this life's tasks
within just a single month or year,
only then to practise Dharma well,
are like harmful spirits that deceive us

The tasks of this life are like ripples on water,
fresh ones arising just as others fade away -
even as we finish them, they continue to increase
Wouldn't it be better just to make them all cease?

Before tomorrow's Dharma practice can arrive,
there's a danger death will come to us today
Thus, if we wish to practise the Dharma,
let us, without self-deception, begin right away

Although buddhas and bodhisattvas came in the past,
their activities pervading throughout the three realms,
now they are no more, and only their names remain
Still, even in this they are teachers of impermanence

Though kings and ministers, proud of their power and wealth,
wrought chains of history, so great and so wondrous -
unexamined, it all seems so real and so concrete,
yet, throughout the three realms, not a trace remains

Friends from the past, similar to us in age and strength,
have been taken, all of a sudden, by the Lord of Death,
so with what confidence can we possibly claim
that we shall not fear when death's time arrives?

Even sheep, among the most foolish of creatures,
are alarmed when seeing their fellows butchered
Failing to apply their example to ourselves,
are we not more insensible than such beasts?

That this body's nature is to die at a time uncertain
can be understood without reference or citation,
but if with bare senses you still do not see it,
then surely "idiot" must be your designation

This gathering of dear ones, servants and dependents
is like a mound formed of leaves fallen from a trees -
a gust of wind will scatter them all,
and, once dispersed, they'll never converge again

People from different places crowded in a market
are like the bees gathered at the end of autumn -
dispersing no sooner than they've come together -
a teaching on transience for those of understanding

Take the outer world of the elements as an example
and don't be deceived by labels of 'summer' and 'winter'
These too do not last, and with each ten days that pass
the mountains and river valleys change their colours

Blue spring water ripples like a dance
and makes pleasant music with its flow,
but when gripped by winter's icy chill,
can only whisper, as if sobbing in sorrow

How pleasant the meadow with its flowers,
as it dances to the singing of the bees,
but all turns to lament and desolation
when autumn brings fierce frost and hail

The cord of life is as fragile as a rope of straw
that day and night are biting through,
and with each and every moment that goes by,
our meeting with Death, draws closer

When a child, young and bright, can sicken unto death,
to be mourned by parents whose hair is white as conch,
and whose backs are hunched over, bent like a bow,
who then dares to say it's the old who are first to go?

Struck by adversity, as when a crop is stung by hail,
the rich man may lament his loss and sorry situation,
but his cries for help will likely go unanswered
even by the poor servants he cared for in the past

Today's ally can transform into tomorrow's foe
as unguarded words are often misconstrued,
yet this can provide a teaching that'll put an end
to false notions of distant enemy, intimate friend

Samsaric riches are deemed fortune in abundance,
but, as a burning lamp is as if a palace to a moth -
these alluring appearances serve only to deceive,
and to lead us from the real happiness that lasts

In brief, the Lord of Death will soon arrive -
that is certain - even if the time's unknown
and when he comes, there'll be no escape

Even the body you've known for so long
must remain in its bed, as you go on alone,
denied even so much as a backward glance
at your wealth, your friends or your servants...

All help towards allies, all bettering of foes,
carried out so tirelessly throughout this life
must now be abandoned for the final journey -
The only thing you'll take with you?
Your virtues, your flaws

Then, on the intermediate stage's unfamiliar path,
you'll face the army of the dreaded Lord of Death
and, deceived by samsara's fortunes, you'll be lost -
even seeing your mistakes at that time,
and feeling regret will be futile

The Dharma is your guide on a path unknown
The Dharma is your food on a journey, arduous and long
The Dharma is your protector in a dangerous realm,
so engage in Dharma - with body, speech and mind - from now on

If, at this time, when you have the power
for ultimate happiness, you don't build a safe base,
what will you do as you draw your final breath?

This is a song of impermanence, a meditation
"A Great Light for the Middle Way's Illumination"
It's purpose is to strengthen the mind's determination
for Dharma, from the start, in the middle,

and to Ultimate Liberation

As one's mind becomes well inclined towards Dharma,
many paths make claims to be profound,
but the authentic tradition of the Victor Losang Drakpa
shows the essential intention of each powerful Buddha

From oral explanation and deep meditation
on the teachings of sutra and tantra,
know the path well, in all of its aspects,
fully intact, without error,
and then every day, without interruption,
create positive imprints with firm meditation

Right from the preliminaries until the conclusion,
perform well the words of the Jé Lamas -
and thereby you'll take the very heart-essence
of this life of fortunes and endowments

By the strength of the merit accumulated thus,
may the thief of the view of self permanence
lose all its power to grasp true existence,
and may all reach the realm of the deathless.

*Thus, Zhabdrung Ngawang Drakpa, whose positive tendencies from the past
continue to increase, sent a letter requesting advice in verse on how to meditate on
impermanence. He accompanied this request with gifts such as shrine articles for
the mandala of eleven faced noble Avalokiteshvara, and an auspicious silken scarf.
In response, the venerable Könchok Tenpe Drönme composed this in a
straightforward manner which is easy for everyone, high or low, to understand,
which is unconstrained by poetic convention, and which takes the advice of past
saints as a basis. May this be a cause of everyone turning their minds towards the
Dharma!*

* * *

Translated by Tenzin Jamchen (Sean Price) and edited for Lotsawa House by Adam Pearcey, based on an earlier version translated by Tenzin Jamchen and edited by Tenzin Russell.

Lightly edited and with a few revisions by J Espada.

In sum, by reflecting repeatedly on:

impermanence,

the certainty and imminence of death,

the quality of your future lives,

and the power of karma,

overemphasis on the present will turn into a more long-term concern.

When these attitudes become your stable outlook, you have completed development of the first level of practice, and you are ready to rise to the next level.

Next let us take a deeper look at what it means to seek freedom from all types of cyclic existence.

- From the chapter on Karma, from Becoming Enlightened, by His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Taking Refuge

I entrust my spiritual life to the Buddha, the Enlightened One,
the Great Compassionate Teacher,

I dedicate myself to learning, practicing, and realizing the Dharma,
{and in this way take refuge in all the Liberating Teachings},

and I entrust myself to the guidance and support
of the Noble Sangha, the Accomplished Spiritual Community,
the Great Assembly of Saints and Bodhisattvas

Individual Liberation Vows

I vow to free my mind from all suffering and its causes forever

Until this is fully accomplished:

I vow to continue to cultivate the supporting conditions
that will enable me to do this:

ethics, loving kindness and compassion,
great determination, and meditation

I vow to maintain, to improve, and to increase these
as much as needed;

and I vow to continue to cultivate my direct insight, and understanding

In this way,
realizing the Buddha's Path of liberation,
I will perfectly accomplish my aims

Vow

From this point forward,
with all my heart and with all my strength,
I dedicate myself to removing the suffering of all living beings,
and to bringing them happiness

I dedicate myself fully to their healing and awakening;
to their all having comfort,
strength of body, mind, and spirit,
most excellent nourishment, health, longevity
every level of protection,
shelter, food, clothing,
the best of all medicines, education,
leisure, joy, and wisdom

In order to accomplish the needs of living beings
in the most effective way,
I will develop my wisdom and compassion
just as my teachers before me have done
I aim to become free of all faults, and complete in all qualities
and, day by day, hour by hour
to always offer as much help as I can

In this way, I will make a gift of my life
In this way, my own life will be fulfilled

I dedicate myself fully, leaving nothing out,
to the complete healing, fulfillment and enlightenment
of all living beings

No matter how long it takes
no matter how difficult it may be
no matter what it costs

I vow to always serve all living beings
in every way that is necessary for them
and in every way that will bring each and every one of them
true and lasting health and happiness

From A Human Life of Leisure and Opportunity

From Steps on the Path to Enlightenment, Volume One, by Geshe Sopha

Why does this human life have such great value? The highest possible goal for all beings is the perfect enlightenment of buddhahood. Without entering the Mahayana path you cannot achieve that goal. Only human beings can attain the powerful mind of bodhicitta and embark on the bodhisattva path in order to lead all beings to liberation. None of these other forms of life have the capacity to practice this path. This most difficult endeavor can only be accomplished with the kind of human life that we currently possess. The attainment of buddhahood must be done on the basis of a human life. This possibility and potential are why it is priceless. All the buddhas of the past obtained a human rebirth so that they could practice the tantric path, the path of the perfections, or one of the other Buddhist paths. Again from Candragomin's Letter to a Student:

It is only with a human life that you obtain the most powerful mind. That is the basis of the sugatas' path leading all beings to freedom. That path cannot be attained by gods, nagas, demigods, Garudas, wise spirits, ugly spirits, or snakes.

From the religious point of view, a human life has a dynamic power. This ability to practice a religious path gives it a special kind of potential to reach certain high goals. Although in the human realm we endure innumerable forms of suffering, still it is the best place in any of the six realms to develop your practice in order to attain the highest goal. The Dew into the Womb Sutra (*Garbhavakranti-sutra*) says:

Even though one faces innumerable sufferings in a human birth, it is still the best situation. It is difficult to obtain even in ten million cons. When even a god dies the other gods pray. "May you go to a happy rebirth." A happy rebirth is birth as a human.

Even the gods aspire to be born in the human realm. When gods make a dedication at the death of one of their friends, they pray that god may have a happy rebirth. That prayer refers to a human life. Even the beings born in pure lands such as Sukhavati sometimes pray to be born in a human life endowed with eighteen leasures and opportunities.

For two critical steps on the path it is best to have a human life. First, it is necessary to be a human to enter the sravaka, pratyekabuddha, or bodhisattva paths. Later, entry to the arya stage- the first moment of the path of seeing- must generally take place during a human life.

There is a simple reason why a human life is necessary at those points. In order to enter the path you need the special thought of renunciation from samsara. For this to arise you must see the faults of samsara. The first moment of the arya path is the first time you have a direct realization of the four noble truths: here you directly know the truth of suffering the truth of the cause, the truth of cessation, and the truth of the path. It is much easier to see the faults of samsara and the truth of suffering from the vantage point of a human life. On the one hand, a human experiences all kinds of physical pain and mental anguish. But on the other hand, a human has the intellect to recognize the inner and outer causes and conditions of this suffering. You are able to learn about causation and to understand its implications. You can become aware of the impermanence of life, the suffering nature of life, the causes of suffering, and the nature of the mental afflictions.

Among the three realms-the formless, form, and desire realms-only beings of the desire realm are capable of attaining the path of seeing, Among the beings of the desire realm, in general only humans can experience the direct realization of truth that occurs when the path of seeing is first attained. However, certain special desire realm gods can attain the path of seeing during their life. They must have created strong propensities from their practice of the path in a previous life. The gods of the form and

formless realms are not able to do this; in order to attain the path of seeing they must be reborn in the desire realm. Of course, those who attained the arya stage in a prior human life can subsequently be born as gods in the upper realms. Therefore the Treasury of Knowledge says that most of the desire realm gods and all of the form and formless realm gods are considered unfavorable states that lack leisure.

There are humans in a situation similar to the gods. Although the continuous bliss of a god's life is much more intense and engrossing than ours, if some people are very happy enjoying good health, prosperity, and there is nothing to bother them, they see no need to obtain freedom from suffering. They are attached to their ongoing enjoyment and just want that to continue. Therefore they do not relate to explanations of the sufferings of samsara. If someone tells the gods that there is something called misery, they cannot imagine how it looks or feels. Similarly, when I talk about hell or the hungry ghosts, to many of you it seems as unreal as a legend or myth. This is because when you first hear about these realms you cannot connect them to your own experience. If you study and meditate for a long time on various causes and conditions, you may eventually develop some faith in their existence. But in the beginning it is difficult to relate to the idea that such and such a cause will bring such and such a life filled with terrifying misery, burning pain, and all kinds of horrors. So a life of pure pleasure is, in fact, a great obstacle to seeking the highest goal.

To summarize, a human life is the best support for practice. It is so short that without much difficulty your own experience can lead you to see the impermanence of life and the faults of samsaric existence. You can easily recognize the working of causality, because sometimes you can actually see good and bad causes producing good and bad effects. Once you comprehend the causes and conditions that result in some of your experiences, you are able to distinguish good actions from bad actions. You have the power to realize the nature of the self, phenomena, and the vast web of cause and effect. This is all possible if you recognize the value of this

human life and then use it properly. The great potential of this type of life can be realized by learning practicing, and meditating on these pure and correct teachings.

There is no greater self-deluded stupidity than to spend such a wonderful life so senselessly that it bears no fruitful benefit. You have experienced the sufferings of the bad migrations innumerable times: from beginningless time you have taken birth as an animal, hell being, and hungry ghost with no freedom or opportunity to practice the Dharma. You have suffered hunger, thirst, pain, torture, and death countless times. Now, just this once, you are freed from those miserable lives; you have obtained this precious human rebirth. Now that you have this rare opportunity in your hands you must try not to waste it. Use the methods in the teachings to be able to go higher and further along the path in your future lives. Offer some resistance to the tendency of falling back into that endless chain of miserable lives in the lower rebirths. If you knowingly let this chance slip away, you are like someone who has gone completely mad or is mesmerized by the power of some magical incantation. You should meditate over and over on these ideas. As it says in the *Talk That Is Like a Jeweled Receptacle of Good Explanations* (*Subhasita-ratna-karandaka-katha*), by the great saint Aśvaghoṣa:

When someone has obtained a human birth That plants the seed of going beyond samsara. The supreme seed of glorious enlightenment, With unceasing good qualities better than a wish-fulfilling gem. Who would let such a lifetime pass without making it fruitful?

A life that can produce the seeds of liberation from samsara and glorious enlightenment is much more valuable than a wish-fulfilling jewel. Who would waste a life that can plant the seed leading to the fruit of buddhahood?

Then, in Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds, Santideva said:

*So when I have found leisure such as this,
If I do not attune myself to what is wholesome,
There could be no greater deception
And there could be no greater folly.*

*And having understood this,
If I still go on being slothful,
When the hour of death arrives
Tremendous grief will rear its head.*

*Then if my body blazes for a long time In the unbearable flames of hell,
Inevitably my mind will be tormented
By the fires of unendurable remorse.*

*Amazingly, having somehow found
This beneficial state that is so hard to find,
If now, while able to discriminate I once again am led into the hells*

*Then as though I were hypnotized by a spell
I shall reduce this mind to nothing.
I do not know what is causing me confusion.
What is there dwelling inside me?*

Remember that Santideva is talking to himself here. He is not talking to you or to anyone else. He is exhorting himself to practice now that he has obtained such wonderful freedom and opportunity. We must do exactly the same thing. It doesn't do you any good to judge others. It won't help you to criticize people, "He is doing this. She is doing that. He is stupid. She is bad." You should be looking at yourself. Ask, "What am I doing? What am I thinking? How am I spending my life?" Once you know what should be done, you can make your life meaningful by measuring your actions

against the teachings. If you check your own mind this way then naturally your life will become fruitful.

The Foundation of All Good Qualities, by Tsong Khapa

The foundation of all good qualities is the kind and venerable guru. Correctly devoting to him is the root of the path. By clearly seeing this and applying great effort, May I rely upon him with great respect.

By understanding that the precious freedom of this rebirth is found only once, is greatly meaningful and difficult to find again, May I generate the mind that unceasingly, day and night, takes hold of its essence.

This life is as impermanent as a water bubble - how quickly it decays and death comes! And after death, just like a shadow follows the body, the results of black and white karma follow.

Finding firm and definite conviction in this, May I always be careful to abandon even the slightest negativities and accomplish all virtuous deeds.

Seeking samsaric pleasures is the door to all suffering. They are uncertain and cannot be relied on. Recognizing these shortcomings, May I generate the strong wish for the bliss of liberation.

Led by this pure thought, mindfulness, alertness and great caution arise. The root of the teachings is keeping the pratimoksha (individual liberation) vows. May I accomplish this essential practice.

Just as I have fallen into the sea of samsara, so too have all mother migratory beings. May I see this, train in supreme bodhicitta, and bear the responsibility of freeing migratory beings.

By clearly recognizing that developing bodhicitta, without practicing the three types of morality¹, I will not achieve enlightenment, May I practice the bodhisattva vows with great energy.

By pacifying distractions to wrong objects, and correctly analyzing the meaning of reality, May I generate quickly within my mindstream the unified path of calm abiding and special insight.

Having become a pure vessel by training in the general path, May I enter the holy gateway of the fortunate ones, the supreme vajra vehicle.

At that time, the basis of accomplishing the two attainments is keeping pure vows and samaya. Having become firmly convinced of this, May I protect these vows and pledges like my life.

Then, having realized the importance of the two stages, which are the essence of the vajrayana, by practicing with great energy, never giving up the four sessions, May I realize the teachings of the holy guru.

Like that, may the virtuous teachers who show the noble path, and the spiritual friends who practice it have long lives. May I pacify completely all outer and inner hindrances.

In all my rebirths, never separated from perfect gurus, May I enjoy the magnificent Dharma. By completing the qualities of the stages and paths, May I quickly attain the state of Vajradhara.

¹ Three aspects of the perfection of morality: the morality of restraining from wrong-doing, the morality of accumulating merit and the morality of benefiting sentient beings.