

Precious Human Life - Part 1 of 4: The Eight Freedoms (lightly edited transcript)
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Having properly relied on a spiritual master, the stages for training our mind

So, we've finished the topic of "How to relate to a Spiritual Master." Or should we put it this way—we've just begun the topic [laughter], and we're still contemplating and thinking about it. And we're entering now into the second big headline in this section: '*Having relied on a spiritual master, the stages for training our mind.*' It has two basic subdivisions:

- i) Being persuaded to take advantage of our precious human life and
- ii) How to take advantage of our precious human life.

Being persuaded to take advantage of our precious human life

In the first one of '*being persuaded to take advantage of our precious human life,*' we have to first of all recognize what a precious human life is, then talk about what its purpose is, what it can be used for, how it can be meaningful, and third of all, to check up whether it's easy or difficult to get it again; in other words, whether it is a rare opportunity or whether it is easy to come by again.

We'll start from the beginning – trying to recognize what a precious human life is. The standard way of teaching this is to talk about two main things:

- a) The eight freedoms, and
- b) The ten riches, or endowments.

The eight freedoms are talking about the eight states that we are free from being, and the ten riches or endowments are ten qualities that we have to check up if we have. As we're going through this list of eighteen, we should think about it in terms of our own life, and see if we have all eighteen or don't we have all eighteen? How do we get some of them? What can they be used for? And so on.

Now remember a few lessons ago, I told you not to expect symmetry in the categories made in the outline*. Well here, we have a perfect example. We have eight freedoms and ten riches. We're

going to go through the eight freedoms first and you'll be fine. But when we get to the ten richnesses, you'll be asking, "Oh! Why are these here? They're the same as the eight freedoms, except they're just the opposites." Except not all of them are [laughter]! So again, don't expect it to be the Western way of making an outline. There are going to be some points that will overlap and there's going to be some repetition. But it's also a matter of looking at things from different perspectives because when we're looking at a freedom, we're seeing that we're free from a bad state. Whereas, when we're looking at a richness, we're seeing that we have a good state. So it's two different ways of coming to the same thing.

Potential Difficulties in Studying the Eight Freedoms and Ten Richnesses

Now, having taught this before, I know some of the difficulties that people might have with it, and so I think it's important to address them at this point.

The Notion of Rebirth

One of the difficulties is that it talks about how we're free of being reborn as an animal or as a hell being and things like that, and we go, "Huh? What are you talking about? I thought there was only this life?" This was why I gave that talk about *karma, rebirth and cyclic existence and how the mind goes from life to life*[#], because this is a topic that is assumed in the Tibetan tradition since everybody grows up believing in rebirth. So we've talked about that already. For the new people, there are some chapters in Open Heart Clear Mind that talks about rebirth, karma, and cyclic existence. You might want to read that and begin to think about it.

Sometimes, in discussing the perfect human life, the mind gets a little rebellious and tough because we're not completely sure that we believe in rebirth. We're not even completely sure if human beings can be reborn as other kinds of living beings. So this is often one sticky point for Westerners. It might be a sticky point for some of you; if it is, join the club! But also go back and either listen to the tape of the talk on rebirth or do the reading in Open Heart Clear Mind. Recognize that it is going to take you some time to gather conviction about the existence of past and future lives and to gather some feeling about how our mind can be born in many different kinds of bodies.

One of the big hindrances to thinking that we may have had other lives is we have such a solid view of who we are now; we feel so settled into this body, so attached to this body, that really, if we think about it, it's hard to imagine being a baby! Isn't it? Can you imagine being a baby? Can you imagine being this big and not being able to walk? And peeing in your pants! We can't even imagine that! We're so concretized in this body, can you imagine being an old person, unable to get up and walk around? We can't even imagine that! That's just symptomatic of how concrete we've made our identity right now. We can see that that concretization is really a misrepresentation of who we are, because within the continuum of this human body, it's been quite different going from a baby to an old person.

If you think like this, it begins to get you in a mood to think that you're capable of living in different kinds of bodies with different abilities. So that's one sticky point in this meditation.

Getting Proud

The second sticky point is the purpose of this meditation is not to make us proud. We're not sitting here listing all our good qualities and good fortune in order to come to a conclusion that we're the best people in this world, that we're the superior people, quite magnificent compared to all the other slobs. That's not the purpose of this meditation. We have enough pride already. We don't need to study Dharma to become more proud. If you listen with a certain kind of ear, you're going to hear this meditation in the sense of, "Oh, this meditation is really sounding very discriminatory, like we're putting ourselves up and putting others down." That's not the way the Buddha meant this teaching to be; that's the way that mindset is listening to this teaching. So, beware of that, because the whole purpose of this meditation is for us to recognize our good qualities and opportunities and what we have going for us, and by recognizing these things, we feel very joyful and we come up with some determination to use these things wisely.

Now, here's a big difference. We can look at a set of good qualities and our afflicted [Note: 'afflicted' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'deluded'] mind can look at those good qualities and get very proud. And that's why we think this meditation is encouraging us to be proud and

condescending towards other people. This is not true, because we can also look at these same qualities and say, “Wow! This is fantastic! I really rejoice at these qualities.” So you see, it’s two different reactions to the same subject matter. When we’re looking at good qualities, we can react with pride, or we can react with a sense of joy combined with a determination to use our opportunity in a wise way. It’s this latter way that we’re aiming at in listening to these teachings here. Like I said, we have enough pride already and the Buddha is not teaching us to be more proud. Nor is the Buddha teaching us to put other people down. In fact, it’s the exact opposite. Criticizing other people, putting other people down is a very negative state of mind.

Now, I find—I think it’s related to our American culture—this is just my guess, maybe you people can give some feedback. We have this notion of equality, that everything’s completely equal, but the thing is, we’re not completely sure what equality means. We have to make a distinction here. In one way, everybody’s equal. Even in terms of the American constitution, everybody’s equal and everybody gets the same freedom and the same responsibilities as a citizen. But everybody isn’t equal in the sense that Steve cannot do Laura’s job and Laura cannot do Steve’s job, because they’ve been trained differently! So, they’re unequal in that respect.

So we have to be clear that by pointing out distinctions amongst people or amongst groups or even amongst religions, it doesn’t mean we’re criticizing one person or group or religion or that we’re placing them on different levels! It simply means things are different in relative ways. Things have different characteristics. Chili peppers and apples are the same in being food, but if you carry this thing of equality too far and if you say that chili peppers and apples are exactly the same and it doesn’t matter which one you bake the pie with, then I’m not sure I’m going to come to your house to eat chili pepper pie!

We have to be very clear that we can use our wisdom mind to make distinctions amongst things, but that doesn’t mean that we’re criticizing. This is real important. An animal is different from a human being. They are both equal in being sentient beings, wanting happiness and not wanting to suffer, but an animal can’t drive a car! And a human being can’t pull a cart! Not those big, heavy ones anyway. Are we communicating here?

If we don’t understand this, then as we go through and I’m pointing out the distinctions between human beings and other forms of life or between human beings with certain qualities and other human beings, you may think we’re getting a little bit proud and critical and putting some people up and other people down. But that’s not the case. We’re just making relative distinctions about relative reality and then trying to develop a constructive way of viewing those distinctions. So as we go through the material, if you have difficulty with it, please let me know. We’ll have questions at the end, and then if somehow this still isn’t clear, we can go over some of it.

Having prepared you for all the reasons why you’re not going to understand the subject [laughter], now we can go on, and you probably will understand it.

Purpose of Meditating on Precious Human Life

As I said, the purpose of meditating on our precious human life is to make us aware of the opportunities and good qualities that we have going for us. Most of us spend our lives not recognizing all the things we have going for us, and only looking at what isn’t going for us. We might have so many wonderful things going for us but we get in a bad mood because we missed the bus in the morning! And that bad mood just spoils the whole day! We don’t bother to think about the fact that we had breakfast, that we have a nice family, that we have nice colleagues. We let one small thing completely bum us out. Do you find this in your life? Isn’t this the way we are? This meditation is to help us rebalance how we’re looking at our life. By noticing all the good things, it makes us realize that we may have some difficulties, but compared to what we have going for us, our difficulties really aren’t that serious.

The Eight Freedoms

So now, we’ll talk about the eight freedoms. Four are freedoms from non-human states where there’s no chance to practice the Dharma, and four are freedoms from human states where there’s no chance to

practice Dharma. Here, we're looking at the ability to practice Dharma as a very beneficial thing, a good thing. We are making that discrimination.

A. The four non-human states with no chance for Dharma study

1. Life forms experiencing continual pain and fear

The first is that we are free from life forms experiencing continual pain and fear; this is a polite way to say freedom from being born in the hell realms. Some people (I, for instance) prefer the polite way because for me, the word 'hell' or the word 'sin'—these are words that I just don't like because I have too much overlay from previous time. So don't let your previous overlay filter too much how you're looking at this. All we're talking about here is that it's possible for our mind streams to be born in different life forms. Why? Because the life form we take, the body we take and the kind of life we live is a conditioned phenomena—it's conditioned by our own actions, it's dependent on causes—our previous actions. The body we receive in the future correlates very much with certain mental attitudes we had in the past, it's almost as if our body, or the realm that we are born into, is a manifestation of different mental states.

Think about a time in your life when you were very depressed, hostile and angry, or very fearful and paranoid. Remember what it was like to be in that mind state? Remember how painful that was? Now imagine that mental state appearing in a physical form, that mental state just getting bigger and bigger until it appears as your environment and your physical form. Now that is a being who has been born into a life form experiencing continual pain and fear. So when we talk about the hell realm, this is what the hell realm is. It's that mental state, so strong, so intense, that it creates your environment. And you can see even in this life, without even changing bodies, when you're in that mental state. Even when someone says, "Hello, how are you?" and smiles at you, you think they're trying to harm you. That's how people go insane, because their projection on the external environment gets so strong that it becomes their whole experience.

So, we're free from having that kind of life form. If it's too difficult for you to think of having a body of a being in the hell realm, then just think of having a human body that's in continuous pain. Imagine having a very severe disease whereby your joints and your back and everything are aching all the time and you have no respite from that and together with that, you have incredible excruciating mental pain, so that your whole experience from morning to night is pain. Not one single split second of a break! Now, with that kind of physical and mental state, are you going to be able to practice the Dharma? Difficult, huh? I mean, we just get a stomachache and we can't come to teachings, we can't meditate. It is difficult enough to practice with a human body that's in pain, let alone when we're born into a life form, in a whole environment, that's like that.

It's something to rejoice at, that at this moment, we're not born like that. If you think about it, it's incredible fortune. Because as we develop an understanding of the whole Buddhist view of the cosmos and past and future lives, then we will understand that actually, many times in the past, we have been born in that kind of body and that kind of environment. Not once, but many times! We've done everything in cyclic existence! So all those times when we were born in that incredible painful state, there was no opportunity to practice. You're just sitting there screaming and crying all the time, no ability to do anything! So, the fact that we're free from all of that right now is really a cause for rejoicing, it's an incredible blessing!

It's far out, huh? It's something to appreciate because we've been born that way in the past and it's possible to be born that way in the future, but we have a great opportunity now, being free of that kind of pain.

Is this giving anybody difficulty?

[Audience: inaudible]

[laughter] I understand and sympathize with your difficulties. If it's too hard to imagine that kind of life form, just imagine a human body and a human mind experiencing that kind of intense suffering. And then pull yourself out of it, and say, "Well, I'm not in that state. Isn't that great?" Because we all know it's only when you get sick that you realize how much you've taken being well for granted. And how we don't even appreciate being well until we get sick and then we can't move? So this is kind of like that.

It's saying we don't have to get sick to appreciate we're well. Let's just imagine what it's like and know that we aren't like that now, and to appreciate it.

2. Life forms experiencing continual frustration and clinging

The second life form that we're free of—now again, try to see this life form as a manifestation of the mind—is life forms that experience continual frustration and clinging. So, imagine a time in your life, when you felt tremendously insecure and you just clung on to whatever was around you, whatever person or object or situation in your life, you just clung. Or, imagine when you were really obsessed about something, really greedy about something, where you can't get your mind off something, completely stuck on something and how frustrating that was because you can't get what you want? You never feel secure enough, you never have enough of this, it never works out quite right, so you're clinging, you're obsessed, you're trying so hard and you can't ever find satisfaction. Can you remember a time in your life when you were in that mental state? No...not you people! [Laughter]

Now, imagine that mental state appearing as your body and your environment so that your whole life, not just a period of your life but your whole life, from the time you're born to the time you die, is just clutching and clinging and frustration and running from one thing to the next trying to get something that's going to make you happy...

[Recording is incomplete due to change of sides during tape recording.]

3. Animals

[Front part of this section lost due to change of sides during tape recording.]

...Can they reflect on their positive and negative actions and make choices in their behavior? It's difficult! So if we're born as an animal, the mind is in a very limited state. And this is a reality. We're not criticizing animals. I'm all for animals' rights also. But it's a reality. There is a difference between the physical and mental states of an animal and a human being. As an animal, one does have more limitations. If we're born as an animal, it's very difficult to do any spiritual practice, it's very difficult to observe the law of cause and effect and make preparation for future lives and purify past lives' karma. So it's an incredible fortune we have that we are not born that way right now, in this lifetime. If you try to put yourself in that situation and come back to where you are now, it's like, "Oh wow! Being a human being isn't so bad! We do have quite a bit going for us! We do have quite a lot of freedom and a lot of capability." Can you appreciate that?

4. Celestial beings

And the fourth one is that we are free of being a celestial being. Being a celestial being is like being born in Beverly Hills except you don't have to pay taxes and there is no crime. It's better than Beverly Hills actually. It's being born into a realm where there is just complete pleasure all the time. It's like ten-star hotel deluxe! Everything you could possibly want in terms of food, music, sunshine, sports, sex, perfume, art—whatever it is you like, it's there in abundance. You don't even have to look for it—it's there! And you just enjoy it all the time! Maybe that one you want to believe exists! [Laughter]

Now imagine just even being a human being that is so pampered, completely spoilt! Everything you want, you get. Or imagine a time in your life when you were just so filled with attachment, so filled with sense pleasure delight. When you were in that state, did you practice the Dharma? Too busy eating, drinking and making merry, who wants the Dharma then? This is the disadvantage of being born a celestial being; it's that you just have too much sense pleasure. There're no problems, so you think, "Well, no problems, everything is great! I don't need to take care of karma; I don't need to create good karma. I'm enjoying this!"

And so you go through your whole life enjoying and enjoying and when you die, what happens then? As Serkong Rinpoche said, once you get to the top of the Eiffel tower, there's only one way to go. Once you get born in the celestial realms, after you've consumed that karma, there's only one way to go! You're born into a life of a lot more misery! And you're born there without having made any preparation whatsoever. Because you spent your whole life just enjoying the fantastic Disney World life!

So it's really something to rejoice about, that we're free from being reborn in that circumstance, because if our mind is really serious about attaining enlightenment, situations of extreme pleasure are just as

disadvantageous as situations of extreme pain. In our ordinary state of mind, we can't cope with too much of either. We get totally overwhelmed.

B. The four human situations with no chance for Dharma study

Now, it's getting easier. Now we're going to talk about the four kinds of human situations that we have not been born into. Again, I need to remind you that I'm not criticizing those people who have been born in those situations. The whole purpose is just to make us see our fortune in our specific life.

1. Barbarian among uncivilized savages or in a country where religion was outlawed.

The first is that we have not been born a barbarian in an uncivilized place or in a country where religion is outlawed. Again, when you are meditating on this, put yourself in the situation of somebody who's been born in a very uncivilized place, let's say a place where they do human sacrifice. Those societies have existed before, and they still exist. Now let's say you're born in a place where there's human sacrifice, or even animal sacrifice. If you're born in such a society, it's going to be difficult to practice the Dharma because there are not going to be any teachers around and also, through the acculturation process, you're going to come to hold those kinds of views. And you're going to engage in animal sacrifice or human sacrifice. It's difficult to put the mind in a virtuous state when you're born into that kind of place.

Or if you're born in a country where religion is outlawed—imagine being born in a communist country. This was what it was like in Tibet until they loosened it up slightly. First of all, they went to the monasteries and completely defrocked everybody. They made monks and nuns have sex in public, they made them go collect feces and bring them back, and if they didn't collect enough feces, then, they would beat them. This is true. I've heard stories from people and these have been their experience. If they were caught even moving their mouths saying prayers, they were beaten. Imagine being born in a place where religion was outlawed like that. Would it be difficult or easy to practice the Dharma? Could you have teachings? Could you do practice? Could you learn? Would you feel safe and secure? Very difficult!

So here, we're making a distinction—we're very fortunate to be born in a country where there is religious freedom. That doesn't mean that everybody who's born in a country where there is no religious freedom is a bad person. It doesn't mean that everybody who's born in an uncivilized place is a bad person. It just means that in those situations, there is no freedom to do Dharma practice because you don't have the external conditions around for you to do so.

This is very effective to think about. Imagine being born in China during the period of the cultural revolution, or being born in the Soviet Union at the time of Stalin. Could we practice religion then? Could we make our mind virtuous? Could we get teachings? Could we meditate? We'd probably be out in some camp in Siberia digging ditches! It's important to think about this because many human beings are experiencing that. We might have experienced that kind of situation in a previous life. We're very fortunate now not to be experiencing that. We have a lot of freedom, a lot of capability.

2. Where Buddha's teachings are unavailable, where a Buddha hasn't appeared and taught

We're also free from being born in a place where the Buddha's teachings are unavailable and where a Buddha hasn't appeared and taught. There are many places in this universe which have life. In other planets, other societies, the people haven't had the fortune of having a Buddha come and teach the Dharma. If the Buddha hasn't appeared and explained the whole path to enlightenment to us, then there's no opportunity to practice it. Again, this is something to really appreciate, that we're born in a place where the Buddha has appeared and given teachings and done that whole explanation because countless times before, we've been born in places where we haven't had that opportunity. If the doctrine doesn't exist and there are no teachers there, if the Buddha has not appeared to explain all the methods, to explain how to develop the altruistic intention, or to explain how to decrease your anger, or to explain how to decrease your attachment. If there are no teachings existing in that place, then again, it's difficult to practice. So again, we've been very fortunate in our life to be born in a situation where the Buddha has appeared on this earth and has given teachings, and that those teachings still exist.

3. Mentally retarded, deaf, dumb, blind

We're free from being born mentally retarded, deaf, dumb and blind. Now again I have to repeat that this is not criticizing people who are mentally retarded, deaf, dumb and blind. It's just saying that there is a difference between being able to see and not being able to see. And having full use of your brain and

not having full use of your brain. There's a difference. There's a distinction. And, if we have full use of our sense faculties, we have a lot more ability to practice the Dharma than if we don't. If we're born retarded, even if we come to teachings, we are not going to be interested. We can't understand it. If we're born deaf, it's going to be difficult to hear the teachings. If we're born blind, it's going to be difficult to read the scriptures.

I've wondered—and I want to talk about this with some of my teachers—because it seems to me now, in our present century, the people who have these hindrances are actually less hindered than in the past. We have a lot more things that can enable people who have these disabilities to really live the same kind of life as other people. But still, if we had to choose to be blind or not blind, we would choose to be not blind. So, it's really something to appreciate in our life that we can see and hear, and that we have use of our mental faculties, we aren't retarded. Because so easily we could have been! When we were babies, we were always crawling around near the edge of the bed, or something like that. So easily we could have just fallen off and have a head injury! So easily, when we were born, we could have had the umbilical cord wrapped around our neck and been deprived of oxygen and suffer from retardation as a result of that. So we're free from those disadvantageous states. It's something to feel great happiness about and make a determination to use our abilities in a very constructive way.

4. Having instinctive wrong views

And then lastly, we're free from having instinctive wrong views. An example of somebody who has instinctive wrong views would be somebody who's extremely opinionated and extremely stubborn and who holds very tenaciously to very wrong views. For example, let's say somebody holds the view very tenaciously that it's impossible to become a Buddha. "Absolutely, totally impossible! There's no such thing as enlightenment! Human beings are inherently evil, they're inherently sinful, they're inherently selfish! You can't overcome that human nature so don't even try!" Now, so easily we could have had that kind of views. When I look back at what I thought, the kind of views I had when I was growing up, I had incredible wrong views! We could have been born as—and maybe even in some earlier lives, we were—somebody with incredibly wrong ethical views, saying that it's okay to kill, it's okay to lie, it's okay to steal, it's okay to sleep around. We could have had incredibly stubborn and opinionated wrong views that completely overwhelm our mind and make it extremely difficult for any thoughts of kindness, compassion, enlightenment, purification. These things can't enter that kind of mind because that person doesn't have the interest.

So we're free from having such stubborn wrong views entrenched in our mind. Again, when you're meditating on all these things, really put yourself in the situation of those beings, and feel what it feels like to have those mental and physical states and ask yourself, "Can I practice the Dharma then? Can I transform my mind? Can I understand teachings? Can I develop altruism in that mental and physical state?" And then, this feeling of joy comes because we see that we're not in those states, we have so much freedom and opportunity with us right now.

Questions and Answers

Let me pause here for a minute so that anybody who's feeling incredibly uncomfortable can ask some questions. If there's something that's bothering you so far, please ask.

[Audience:] If the Buddha has infinite wisdom, why wouldn't he appear in a place where teachings were unavailable?

Because the beings in those places don't have the karma to receive the teachings. For example, the sun shines equally everywhere. But if a pot is turned upside down, no light can go inside. So a Buddha, from his or her side, wants to help other beings equally and radiates out. But if those people don't have the karma, there's no way the Buddha can manifest in those places to give teachings.

[Audience:] Aren't we disadvantaged in our attachment to our senses? So if we didn't have any senses, wouldn't it be an advantage?

The problem is in the attachment to the sense, not in the sense! Our sense of sight, we can use it for Dharma practice, or we can use it to create a cause of pain. So, it's not the sense of sight in itself, it's the attachment to beautiful things that's the difficulty! I don't think we would all go home and blind

ourselves tonight so that we don't get attached to beautiful things. Or make ourselves deaf so that we don't get attached to beautiful sounds. Because it's clear that our senses can be used for very constructive things as well. We can use our hearing faculty to listen to teachings and that's very important because we learn so much through hearing. Similarly, we learn so much through seeing and reading. It is a disadvantage if we don't have access to information in those forms.

[Audience:] I have some difficulty in believing in the different realms. Also, the presentation seems to be suggesting that it's more fortunate to be a Buddhist than to be anybody else.

In terms of the belief in other life forms, that is a difficult thing and more so because we're so entrenched with the concept of who we are. But if you can just start out by sitting with you dog or cat or whatever kind of pet and think, "Is that a living being? Does it have a consciousness? Is it thinking? Is it feeling? Does it have some similarities with me? Would it be possible for me to be born in that body? And for that consciousness to be born in a human body?" Just try and think about it a little bit and get some feeling just even about animals. There are different capabilities of consciousness. There are even some human beings who have less mental capabilities than animals, so if it's hard for you to imagine being born in an animal body, imagine being born as a human being with that kind of mental capability.

I said when I was beginning this whole Lamrim course that I'm teaching according to the traditional outline*. I know it's a difficult presentation for Westerners and I'm trying to teach it very much with that in mind and to give you some of the background information and some of the tips on how I handled it. But it's the kind of thing, where for some people, rebirth is not a problem, while for others, for years and decades, it remains a problem. It just depends on the individual. So it's the kind of situations where you have to be a little spacious and gentle with your mind. There're no screws on it, "You *have* to believe in it!" But think about it, try it on. If it explains things so that it makes sense, then, "Well, maybe yeah, it could be like this!" And if it can be used to explain certain things in your life, then, "Well, yeah, maybe that could be due to previous lives."

In regards to the impression you have that the presentation is such that it seems so great to be born a Buddhist... You see, that's why I prefaced this with the explanation that we're not trying to put some people up and other people down. Buddhism is very spacious in the sense that it says that it is very good there are many religions because everybody has different ways of thinking. Everybody has different things that meet their needs. Now, it could be that as you come to understand Buddhism very well, there might be certain things in it that you appreciate very deeply. Maybe you can find those same things in other religions, maybe you can't—because we don't know everything about other religions. But at least you can see that these things exist in Buddhism and that these things meet your needs and that feels good, and you feel rejoiceful about that.

And sometimes, you may look at the popular way that some other religions are taught, and see that some of these elements are missing. Now, that's not to say that these other religions don't have those elements. It's just saying that the popularized version... If you take any religion that's fundamentalist—I don't care what religion it is; even fundamentalist Buddhist—it's going to lack many of these elements that we tend to treasure so much about these teachings. Now, that is just reflecting on that fundamentalist dogma. It's not reflecting on the people who believe it, it's not reflecting on the people who practice it—on the individuals, on the saints in those religions. It's just saying that if we were born in that environment and we were educated in that way, we would probably think like that. Do we want to be born as a fundamentalist anything? I don't think so!

So it's just saying that there are elements in Buddhism that are really precious and I'm glad I met this religion and I'm glad I have the mental space to appreciate these things. Because with a change in circumstance, I could have been born in a different place and raised in a completely different way and grown up with a mind like this (fundamentalist)! Very possible! I mean, our minds can be so narrow! That's not something that is beyond us. So, it's just rejoicing that we're not like that.

I look at myself and I think of all the different environments I could have been brought up in. I know that I'm very easily influenced by the environment. And if I were brought up in a certain environment, I would probably think like that. And I'm sure glad I wasn't brought up that way.

[Audience:] So, if you're born as a worm, how do you stop being a worm? How do you progress?

Well, this is one of the disadvantages of being a worm! Now, it is possible that as a worm, you can get out. We all as human beings, we've created some positive actions and we've created some negative actions. Let's say at the time of death, one of the negative actions takes foremost precedence and throws us into a worm body. That positive imprint is still there, even though the worm karma is manifesting right now. The worm karma can finish, the positive karma can ripen and then you can be reborn as human being again. That's possible. A human is seen as the most advantageous state for spiritual development. A worm can be born as a human being by virtue of their past good karma.

Also, animals can create good karma in this lifetime by hearing mantras, by contacting holy objects etc. So you have all the Tibetans who take their sheep on their circumambulations—if you ever take a walk with me, you're always saying mantras to the cats and dogs on the streets—and so like that, they can come into contact with something that can put some good imprints in their mind and that's why you should all say lots of mantras to your animals and your pets and say your prayers out loud so they hear them. And that puts good imprints in them so they can come up, to a higher rebirth.

This is actually one of the reasons why we think about this. It is hard, once you're an animal, to get out of it. You *can* get out of it, either by some good imprint while you're an animal or by some previous good karma but it's definitely very hard. So if we understand this, it makes us appreciate our present circumstance much more so that we use it wisely!

It's like, once you're thrown in some prison in Cambodia, it's hard to get out. So, before you're in the prison in Cambodia, if you think about how wonderful it is to be free, then, you're going to make sure you're not going to do anything dumb that's going to throw you into prison. Because it's going to be hard to get out! So that's the way we're supposed to think. Again, it makes us really appreciate our present circumstance!

[Audience: inaudible]

It's true that different Buddhist traditions do place more or less emphasis on the six realms of existence. The Tibetans have you think about it as a way of making you appreciate your present circumstance and making preparations so that you don't wind up being somewhere you don't want to be. Other Buddhist traditions don't approach the teaching in the same way.

[Audience:] Does our mind create our environment or does our body create our mental state?

They both happen. Because our mind in the sense of the karma we create, creates the environment in which we're born into. In terms of our own mental projections, our own way of viewing things, it creates our environment. Also, our body that we're born into creates our mental states because when you're born with certain kinds of nervous systems, you have certain perceptual capacities and when you're born with other kinds of nervous systems, you have other kinds of perceptual and intellectual capacities.

[Audience: Inaudible]

I'm not going to say what your ego wants to hear! Instead of me giving you an answer, let's check up using logic and let's think about it. The cause of being born as a human being is first of all, keeping ethical conduct, secondly, practicing the six far reaching attitudes and third of all, making dedication prayers so that the karma ripens in that way. We need these three causes. Do these sound like reasonable causes to be born as a human being? There is continuity between ethics and the six far-reaching attitudes, and making prayers for that good karma to ripen in a human body – you can see the relationship between those causes and having a good life, where you can practice and work on your spiritual path. Now, let's just check up whether it's easy to create those causes or not.

Let's take the first cause: ethics. In this world, is it easy to keep ethical behavior? In the course of one day, do people create more positive actions or more negative actions? So we just examine, we check up. Also look into your own experience, you take one day in your life, did you have more thoughts of anger or did you have more thoughts of patience?

In the course of one day, when the opportunity came to lie to one's advantage, do most people lie or do they refrain from lying? What do most people do? When most people are faced with the situation where they could take something and not get caught, do they take it? Or do they not take it? When most people are confronted with harm and insults, do most people yell and scream and blame and get angry and insult and retaliate? Or do most people forgive and have patience?

So we just check up if it's easy to keep ethical conduct or not? We look at our own life or we look at the society around us. How many people keep real serious meticulous ethical conduct? And so in this way, we just examine whether it's easy or difficult to get ourselves a human rebirth.

Do most people purify their negative imprints? When they create negative karma, how many do take the effort to purify? How many of you who've heard teachings on purification do purification every night?

I'm not telling you the answer, I'm just giving you some tools to think about it. I do have a quote from His Holiness. He says, "Even now, when we have the protection of our Dharma practice, the three afflictions [Note: 'afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes'] still dominate us." You think this is true? So is it easy to be born as a human being?

[Audience: inaudible]

[laughter] You see, that's when we come to see that we did do a lot of good in the past, that we did do something quite extraordinary and remarkable in the past to have the opportunity to be here now! It's almost miraculous! Because so many things could have gone wrong along the way.

Also, our Earth is just one small little atom in the universe. So, from the Buddhist perspective, there are lots of other life forms in the universe. I mean, you can see the extent of our self-centeredness. We think Planet Earth is the most important place in the entire realm of existence. But scientifically speaking, you could go by Earth in the solar system and not even notice it. You could miss that turn real easily. [laughter] It's a big universe. It's really quite ego-centric to think that we are the only kind of life that exists in the entire sphere of existence. Especially when we don't know what that entire sphere of existence is, we don't know anything! And as hard as it is for us to believe in that, if you grew up in an Afghani tent your whole life and some Westerner came and said people have landed on the moon, you would have thought they are completely nuts, "What do you know?!"

[Audience: inaudible]

You've brought up a very good point. But it's very interesting. You are having difficulties with the words 'civilized,' 'savage,' and 'barbarian.' But you're also giving the same standard European value to those words. Here in this context, it isn't the European value that's being given to those words. Being civilized in this context doesn't mean you eat with a spoon and a fork. Those words are not being used in the European, imperialistic, proud way. I'm sorry if I didn't explain it very well, if this didn't come through. If we look properly, we will find that our society is actually very barbaric and uncivilized. If you look, much of the way in which this society runs is completely barbaric and uncivilized. Similarly, many people look at the Tibetans and say they're a very backward people, and yet ..[Audience speaks]. Yes, but here, we're looking at the meaning of those words from a completely different viewpoint. 'Civilized' and 'barbaric' aren't measured in terms of your table manners and how much money you have and how much technology you have. They're measured in terms of human values and human kindness.

[Audience:] Are these realms of existence physical forms? And if they are physical forms, where are they?

Different teachers say different things. My own thinking is... I mean, an animal is definitely a physical form—you can see many of them. Now I'm just giving you my own personal thought on it. I'm born a human being and I feel quite solid—this is a human body, this is a human realm, I have a human mind, this is reality. This is not a mental state. This is external 3D reality. That is my ignorant perception of my situation. Now, I have a sneaking suspicion that if I had a hellish mind, completely caught up in my own fear and paranoia and suspicion, I would probably perceive the world in a very similar way. Here I am, a hell being, with this body and this horrible stinking environment around me and this is reality.

So I wonder if you can say one realm is more real than any other realm is. Or whether one realm is a

mental creation and another realm is not a mental creation. My own personal feeling is it would make more sense to say something equal about all of them. But people may have different views. I mean, the whole point is we think we're perceiving reality, don't we? This is our whole problem! I mean, where is planet Earth? We think, "It's *HERE*, this is *IT!*" Well, if you're born somewhere else, you have that same feeling, "It's *HERE*, this is *IT!*" Let's say there are beings in some other planets. And somebody says "Where's Planet Earth?" "Huh? How do you spell that?" I mean, what do you mean? Where is it? Anywhere we are, we feel it's *HERE!* This is reality. That's why people couldn't imagine the earth being round because people would fall off the bottom. Because we all think that here, where we're standing, is reality. I'm trying to get us to look at how we're looking at the world.

*This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>

#Talk on Mind, Rebirth, Cyclic Existence and Enlightenment given at the beginning of the series.