

Precious Human Life - Part 3 of 4: Its Importance and Rarity (lightly edited transcript)
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This is a series of talks on the gradual path to enlightenment. The teachings originally came from Buddha through the Indian sage Atisha who brought them to Tibet. They were again redeveloped by Lama Tsong Khapa, and it's in this kind of tradition of extracting the essence of Buddha's teachings, presenting them in a gradual way, a step-by-step way, so that we know how to go from our present confused state to a fully enlightened state.

Commitment to Lamrim Teachings

I decided to do this series of teachings because I found that people had little bits of Dharma understanding from here and there; from taking a course here and there. But nobody really had a global view of how to put all the different weekend retreats together so that they made sense in a big whole. So going through the Lamrim or the gradual path is designed to give people a big overview of the whole path and the advantage of doing that is that then when you get other teachings, you'll know where to put them and you'll also know how to cultivate things in a very systematic way yourself.

For people to get benefit from this, it is important for people to come very regularly. The series is designed for people who are serious. Of course, people can come once or twice to try it out and then decide. But this series is really designed for people who are making a commitment to attend all of the teachings because it is going to take a while to explain the whole path. Just as you count on me being here on Mondays and Wednesdays, I count on you being here too, because this happens as a dependent arising. It is not just me, it is also you. And so since the course is designed for your benefit, then it is important that you come. It is not for my benefit. So, please feel a sense of personal responsibility and commitment to attend all of the sessions.

Daily Meditation on the Lamrim

I also want to encourage people to start a daily practice because all the teachings that we are going through are meant for practice. If you miss the early part of the teachings, you can get the tapes. Start a regular meditation practice because through this way you can also sustain the energy that you get here and you are able to develop and you actually start following the path.

The way to structure a meditation session is to do the prayers and visualization to prepare the mind, and some breathing meditation to calm down. Then to do what we call checking or analytical meditation on

the different subjects in the gradual path that we are going through. When you receive teachings on something, you take that information, and in your meditation sessions you think about it and go through the points sequentially. Then you really get a taste of the material and you start to get an experience in your heart as well.

So, try to set up a daily practice and spend like half an hour in the morning. If you don't have half an hour, spend 15 minutes, do something! We always have time to eat, we always have time to sleep, we have plenty of time to talk on the phone, we have more time to go to the movies and discos, surely we can make some time for spiritual nourishment. So I really encourage people to try and do some practice in the morning everyday. It makes a difference to your whole day if you do. You take what you hear here and you think about it. You get an experience of it, then you can come back and ask more questions and go back to think about it some more and that way everything becomes very rich and you start to get somewhere. Otherwise if we don't sit down and think about the teachings, don't try to put them into practice, then this becomes like a university course but without the exam. So, you wind up at the end with lots of notebooks that you put on the top shelf to collect dust, which isn't the purpose of this.

Review

The Preliminaries

We have prepared outlines* for you so you can get a sense, like a roadmap, of where we are going. In the earlier parts, we covered:

- a) the qualities of the compilers of the teaching,
- b) the lineage from the Buddha down to the present day,
- c) the qualities of the Lamrim teaching itself, the benefits that come from studying it, like we'll know how to put our whole practice together, we'll know step-by-step how to progress,
- d) how the gradual path should be studied and taught
- e) how to select a teacher, the qualities to look for in a teacher, qualities to try and develop in ourselves as students.
- f) how to listen to teachings and how to teach them.

From there, we went on to the main body of the text which was how to lead the students to enlightenment through the teachings.

How to rely on spiritual teachers as the root of the path

Here the first topic was how to rely on a spiritual mentor. Under this outline* we actually covered first, all of the preparatory practices – how to set up your shrine, cleaning the room, taking refuge and making offerings, doing the seven-limb prayer, doing the request, all the different steps that are in our prayer sheet. We described the meaning of the prayers and how to actually do a meditation session. Then we went on to how to rely on a spiritual mentor. This subject is put first because it is very important to have a teacher. Just as we need teachers to teach us how to drive cars and how to cook spaghetti and how to do all the other things, definitely in a spiritual path we also need a teacher. We need some guidance and then we need to know how to take the essence of the relationship with our teacher so that we have a good relationship and benefit from it.

I recognize that not everyone here may feel that they have a teacher. The Buddha is actually a teacher to all of us. So if you don't yet feel the connection to one or more actual people as your teacher, you can consider the Buddha as your teacher, and as time goes on, you might find that you have a special feeling for certain people that you want to make a relationship with them as teacher and student. But take your time in doing that, check somebody's qualifications very well, check your relationship with them to get some confidence that you can really benefit from taking them as a teacher.

Stages for training the mind

After talking about how to rely on a teacher, we started talking about the actual stages for training our mind in the path. The first stage that we come to in training our mind is being persuaded *to take advantage of our precious human life*. First of all, do we understand what is a precious human life and to check up if we have it. Secondly, to see what its purpose and usefulness is. Thirdly, to check up its rarity and the difficulty of getting it. When we understand all these things, we will really have a sense of "Yes, I am persuaded to make use of my life. What do I have to do to actually make use of it?"

What Is A Perfect Human Life?

We covered some of the material under the precious human life previously. I'll just review that and then continue on tonight. We have covered before, recognizing what a precious human life is and the different facets of our life that we have to see and to appreciate. So this meditation is really to help us overcome depression, to overcome taking our life for granted, to overcome the mind that concentrates on the one bad thing that we have done wrong today, and ignores the hundred good things that we have done right. This lop-sided attitude that we have: "This is wrong and that is wrong. I can't do this and everything is a catastrophe."

This meditation is an antidote for that because this meditation is saying "Wait a minute! Stop and see what you have going for you." So then we have to look. First of all, I'm a human being. That might not sound like some great, wonderful thing, but if you think of what it would be like not to be a human being, being a human being sounds kind of nice. Like when you go out jogging and you look at the dogs, you look at the cats, you look at the worms and the ducks at Green Lake. You watch all the ducks and you think what would it be like to be born as a duck in Seattle. Then you come back and say, "Oh but I am a human being". And then you really see our potential as human beings. The fact that we have this human intelligence, we have the ability to hear the teachings, understand them and put them into practice. A duck does not have that possibility; neither does a dog or cat.

Similarly, if we were born deaf or dumb or retarded or blind or some very severe handicap like that, then it would be really difficult to hear teachings or to read texts or to do some kind of practice. But we're born with all of our senses intact, we can understand the teachings and this is a very, very special thing to appreciate.

It is important every day when we wake up to just have this feeling that I am alive and I can still think and I can still move and I can practice. This is really quite a wondrous thing. Just to concentrate on feeling that and experiencing that and appreciating it. And then appreciate that we have access to the Buddha's teachings, that we are in this country, able to have teachers, teachings, Buddhist publishing houses. In many other countries in the world, it is extremely difficult to get teachings.

Alex Berzin and I are very good friends and he has gone to some of the countries where it is difficult to get teachings and he told me about it. We sent our little book, "Glimpse of Reality" that we did together, to some of these places like Zimbabwe, Czechoslovakia, Mongolia, different places where it is really hard to get teachings. Later, we get letters back from these people that are incredible, like "Thank you so much, this is so precious". We sent them something, and they replied with a two-page letter that says they were so appreciative to have Dharma material to read. Here we have so much Dharma materials, so many teachings that we often take it for granted. So it is helpful to recognize the opportunity we have now, instead of getting lazy about everything.

Similarly in this country, we have the religious freedom to be able to practice. Not only do we have access to the teachings, but we can also practice them. When I think of what it was like in Tibet after the Chinese takeover, where even if you were seen just moving your lips (saying mantra), you will be beaten or thrown into prison. Alex told me when he was teaching at Czechoslovakia before the fall of the Iron Curtain, at the house he taught, everyone had to come at different times. In the outside room, they set up beer and a card game and everything, and then they went into the other room to have the teachings. But they had to set it all up in case somebody, e.g. the police came.

Here, we have the religious freedom to just come and meet like this. We can go home, we can set up our shrine, sit down and meditate. I think it is incredible to have this freedom and this ability. And so to really contemplate these things so that we get a sense of how precious our life is.

In addition to all these things, we have the material wherewithal to practice. Now I know that everyone here feels that they don't have enough money; that is natural. But, we actually do have quite enough money, I mean we are not homeless. We don't have to worry about where our next mouthful of food will come from, we have enough physical comfort, we have enough food and everything we need to practice. So it's just a question of getting on with it, and really when you stop and think about everything we have going for us, any obstacles actually seem quite minimal.

It is important to think about this so that we get a sense of optimism and a sense that we can do the practice, and we want to, because this is a special opportunity.

Not all people have precious human lives. Human beings all have human lives but a precious human life is quite different, because not everybody has access to teachings and teachers. Not everybody has the material wherewithal, not everybody has their senses intact; not everybody has even the inspiration to follow the path. You talk to some people about loving-kindness and they fall asleep. Just even the fact that we have this interest in developing our spiritual qualities is a very special trait that we have, and it's something to feel pleased about and to treasure in ourselves. This is not a cause to feel proud over other people or to look down on them, but really recognizing what we have going for us. Otherwise it's like having ten thousand dollars in the bank and yet feeling like you can't go to the store to buy a jar of peanut butter because you feel poor. That's how we sometimes feel when we concentrate on the one bad thing that went wrong today. We feel so poor that we can't get anywhere even though we have this whole precious human rebirth and all the opportunity.

As you consider these points, thinking about them one by one, you get a real sense of richness and a real sense of delight, almost a sense of wonder. They say it is like a beggar who all of a sudden found a diamond in his pocket by accident, "Wow, this is incredible! Look what I have here!" And so when we meditate deeply on this, this kind of strong experience comes in the heart.

The Importance of a Precious Human Life

From there, we go on to the next topic which is what use is our perfect human rebirth, what's the purpose of it, what's the meaning of it and what can we do with it? We have this diamond in our pocket, what can I spend it on?

There are three basic things that we can use our precious human life for:

- 1) temporary goals
- 2) ultimate goals
- 3) making use of our life moment by moment

(1) Temporary Goals

What we are talking about here is having a good life now but especially *preparing for death and making preparations for our future rebirth*. I know that not everybody may have great conviction in rebirth. If you have difficulty with it, you can either listen to the previous lecture that was on rebirth[#], or you can read the chapter in "Open Heart, Clear Mind" about rebirth.

It is possible, with where we are now, to actually make preparation to die peacefully and then have a good rebirth where we can continue on the path. It is important to make that kind of preparation because we don't know when we are going to die. When we consider all the other life forms there are in the universe, we can look at some of them and say definitely, "I don't want to be born as that, I don't want to be a duck in Green Lake, thank you. Green Lake is nice, and ducks are nice, but I don't want to be one."

With our present precious human life, we can use our time, our energy to purify the causes that would make us have an unfortunate rebirth. We can use our life to accumulate the causes, the positive potential that will enable us to have a good rebirth. And by a good rebirth, I mean not only one in which we have health and prosperity and happiness, but one in which we again have the opportunity to encounter the teachings and teachers and to practice the path.

So with our present life, we can make preparation for future lives. When we talk about the subject of death (later on the path), then it comes home to us very strongly that we aren't going to be in this body forever. This body is changing, changing all the time. You look into the mirror everyday and there are more and more wrinkles, and you get up in the mornings and there are more and more aches and pains. We aren't going to be in this body forever. Considering that we are going to check out of one hotel room and move into another one, it is nice to make a reservation at a good hotel. So we want to use our time and energy to create the causes to have a good rebirth in the future.

2) Ultimate Goals

To pursue our ultimate goals means attaining liberation or attaining enlightenment. These are called ultimate goals because these indicate a final spiritual realization in which we finally have some security in our own mind...

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

...We are never secure enough. That's because the real security is when we've finally purified the causes for insecurity in our own mind, mainly our own greed, ignorance and hatred. Real security comes when we have full control over our own mental process, when we can use our qualities at will. When we achieve the ultimate goals, we will finally have a lasting security in our life.

We can use our precious life now to *attain liberation*. This is the state of an arhat in which all of the anger, attachment and ignorance have been removed. All of the karma that causes rebirth has been purified. And at that point, we have attained nirvana or liberation and we can abide in the state of bliss. No drugs, no alcohol needed, just plain old, self-generated, "homegrown" bliss.

Beyond that, another ultimate goal is to *attain the state of full enlightenment*. Here, with full enlightenment, we not only have freed ourselves from the cycle of existence and attained our own liberation, but we've gone beyond that, we've purified even the subtle stains on our mind. We've completely developed our love and compassion so that we have at our finger tips all the skills and talents to be of benefit to others. This kind of state, in which we can make our whole being of benefit to all other beings, is the state of enlightenment. And we have the possibility to attain it on the basis of this precious human life.

It is said in the teachings that just having gotten to where we are right now, having a precious human life, is like half of the battle to enlightenment, even though we might feel so far away from enlightenment. Just even getting the precious human life with all these opportunities is very difficult to get, and somehow we have this possibility right now, and that is like half-way there.

So considering we can do the other half, and there exists methods for attaining enlightenment in this very lifetime, we are very fortunate to encounter them. As we start to study more and more the actual techniques for transforming our mind into the mind of a Buddha, we find that we can even do so without having to go through successive lifetimes; we can do it even this lifetime. So there's a strong meaning and purpose in our life to work towards.

Another thing that we can do in terms of the ultimate goals is that we can also create the cause to be born in the pure land. What's a pure land? It is a place where all the conditions are very conducive for Dharma practice. If we take rebirth in a pure land, it becomes very easy to attain enlightenment because we don't have to go to work, we don't have to sit in traffic, we don't have to do income tax, we don't have to paint our house. We have all the time necessary to practice and all the conditions around us for practice. Also, if we're able to be born in the pure land, our minds are very subdued. Somehow, our attachment and anger and ignorance aren't quite so intense and then because we have so many holy beings around us, so much good situations around us, it becomes quite easy to practice. We no longer feel lazy in the morning to get up and meditate because everybody else is doing it. There is a natural enthusiasm in a pure land to practice.

There are different pure lands. One of the most popular one is the Amitabha Pure Land. It is quite popular in the Chinese and Japanese tradition. The immediate goal is to be born in Sukhavati, Amitabha's pure land, the pure land of joy. The way to be born there is to learn about the qualities of the pure land, or the advantages of being born there, then to develop a very strong wish to be born there. And then to create the causes to be born there, by keeping pure morality, good ethical conduct, by thinking of loving-compassion, by making a special bond with Amitabha by remembering his qualities and then dedicating all the positive potential you create from all these practices for that kind of rebirth. If you can create the cause to be reborn in the pure land, it is very, very good. For a good practitioner, a precious human life is better than being born in the pure land because they say that if you use the tantric methods and you are a good practitioner, you can attain enlightenment much quicker in a precious human body than you can in the pure land. So, it depends where you want to dedicate your merit. I guess we can dedicate for both, kind of have contingency plans, "I want a precious human rebirth, but if it is more advantageous in a pure land, that one is fine too", because the ultimate goal is enlightenment.

3) Making Use of our Precious Life Moment by Moment

This is a very, very important practice. If we have the first two meanings firmly in mind – to attain liberation, to attain enlightenment – then, moment by moment we want to use our time very, very wisely. And so here comes the practice of really being mindful, being aware, "What am I saying and doing and

thinking? Are my thoughts and deeds going in the direction of enlightenment or are they going in the opposite direction?" This practice of being quite aware of what we are saying, doing and thinking.

Here is where your meditation practice is very important because then you take the time out to just sit quietly and undistractedly and get to know yourself.

And then, on the basis of that, it helps you during your daily life when you are running around, to have some kind of mindfulness and awareness of what's going on. And then, when you start to notice it, "Oh! Anger is coming up!" you can apply the antidote. You can do the different techniques for subduing the anger. Or when you start seeing the dissatisfactions or discontent coming, then you become aware of it very quickly when it is still small and you apply the antidote.

This whole thing of making our life meaningful, moment by moment, by being aware, this is what is meant by getting to know ourselves. We are always saying, "I don't know myself, I am alienated, I don't understand myself." That's because we are always thinking of movies, highways and novels and all the other stuff. We are not being aware of what we are saying and doing and thinking and feeling, right now. So this practice of *really being present* and getting to know ourselves is very, very useful and beneficial.

Transforming Ordinary Activities into the Dharma

And then we can actually use different methods to transform some of the ordinary things that we are doing, like we may be aware of ourselves and all, "I'm aware that I'm sweeping the floor," but so what, how does that become particularly virtuous? How does that lead me on to enlightenment? Here, what we call the thought-training teaching is very beneficial. When you sweep the floor, you try and think that the dirt is all the defilements, the afflictions [Note: 'afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes'], the karma of oneself and others. The broom is the broom of wisdom and compassion and you are cleaning your mind and other people's minds as you are sweeping. This is a process of taking a very ordinary thing and transforming it somehow, so that while you are physically doing an ordinary thing, in your mind you are thinking about Dharma, in your mind you are cultivating this wish to lead others on the path to enlightenment. You are cultivating altruism. When you are sweeping, you think about purifying your own mind and others'.

If somebody got angry at you, instead of getting angry at them back, when you are sweeping, think "I am going to be able to clean this person's anger with wisdom and compassion." So then you see, you don't get angry at that person, and you actually start to think of something constructive for them. Similarly, when you are washing the dishes, washing the laundry, washing your car, washing yourself in the shower, whenever you are doing any kind of cleaning thing, you can think that this is the water of wisdom and compassion and you are cleaning away the defilements "greed", "anger" and "ignorance" and all the karma of yourself and others. So, it becomes a transformational thing.

When you go out of the door, you think, "I am leaving cyclic existence behind, I am leaving my garbage-mind behind and I am leading all the other beings out there too." When you come in the door, think, "I am leading all beings to liberation. I am leading them all into a pure land." So with the ordinary things that we do day by day, we can transform in this way. When you go downstairs, think "I am going into all the suffering places in this world, out of compassion, to really help others." When you come up the stairs, or go up the elevator, think, "I am leading myself and others up to higher states of being, and developing our realizations." This way, you're thinking of the Dharma all the time.

For those of you who have studied with Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese monk, he has a whole series of what in the Vietnamese tradition are called "gatas", little things that you recite to yourself before you do everything. It is very, very skillful. He has one that I think is marvelous. When you go in a car, you sit for a moment, and you think, "I know where I am going, and I know why I'm going there." That's pretty heavy-duty, isn't it, considering the amount of time we get in cars and we don't have the vaguest idea where we're going in the car, let alone where we are going in our lives? And so just to sit for a moment, "I know where I'm going in my car. I know where I'm going in my life."

All these little things, like before you answer the telephone, don't just pick it up on the first ring. As it rings, you sit and breathe and think, "May I be of benefit to the person on the other end of the line," and then you pick it up and you say "Hello." When you are at the red light or when you are stuck on the highway because the traffic is terrible, then you stop for a minute and you just breathe and be in the present. And you can sit and think about loving-compassion for all the other beings and all the cars in

the traffic jam around you. You can look at all the people on the sidewalks on the highway, and think they all want to be happy and none of them want pain.

All these little circumstances in our daily life, if we slow down, we become aware, we can transform them all into the path to enlightenment. So really taking time, slowing down a bit. It doesn't take that much time to slow down. Sometimes just even sitting and taking a deep breath or taking three deep breaths. When you get to your job in the morning, just sit for a moment, and think, "I want to be of benefit to everyone I encounter at work today." When you come home at night, you think, "I want to benefit everybody that I see at home and wherever I am going in the evening." And just try and think like that. It only takes like fifteen seconds. If you do it in a long way, it takes a whole thirty seconds, but it makes a big difference.

Here, it is interesting that when we are talking about the purpose or meaning of our precious human life we are seeing it in terms of long-term goals, and in terms of spiritual meaning, in terms of preparing for our next life, in terms of transforming our mind now so that we can attain enlightenment. You will notice that it is quite obvious that the purpose of our precious human rebirth, there is not a fourth point called "making a lot of money" or "climbing up the corporate ladder." These goals are conspicuously off, not printed here. And so we can see that the opportunity with this life, to make it meaningful, we have to shift gears slightly, from the way that we've often been brought up to think as the meaning of our life.

I was brought up thinking that a good career, a nice house, a lot of money, a family, lots of prestige and going to nice parties, fame and all these is the meaning of life. These were what are to be achieved with our lives. From a Dharma viewpoint, they are very nice but they are very transient. They are here and then they are gone. And so from a Dharma viewpoint, the real way to make our life meaningful is by doing this internal transformation so that wherever we go, whatever we do, we can be happy; finding a long term, a more everlasting happiness and use of our life.

Some issues we may face

Alienation

Sometimes, when people start to practice Buddhism and they start to shift gears, from money, materialism, fame and good times to Dharma, they go through this thing of, "Ay, I don't fit into society anymore. I think completely differently from these people, I don't fit in with them anymore." That's a very normal and natural stage to go through in your Dharma development. I know that happened to me and it happens to most people I know. But, here is where it's really important, this whole practice of loving-kindness.

Sure, we may have different goals in our life than other people do. But, the feeling of loving-kindness still means we are very connected to them. Why? Because they do a lot to benefit us. We are very dependent on them. We live in a world together. We are really not alienated at all. So they depend on us, we depend on them. We are very related, and as we cultivate this feeling of loving-kindness more and more, we recognize that even though we all think differently and may have different goals in our life, underneath it all, what we are all looking for is happiness.

We may have different ideas of what happiness is, different methods to attain our own visions of happiness, but that is no reason to feel alienated and separate from people, because underneath it all, the thing is, we all want happiness. Also, we live in the society with them and we inter-relate so much – we can't live on our own, it's impossible. We are very intimately related with all the people that we share this planet with. If you remember this, then the process of shifting gears is not so painful and you don't feel alienated.

Also as we get into the Dharma practice and we start shifting gears, because we understand how our own mind and our own feelings operate, we begin to understand other people better. We understand better what other people are going through simply because we have taken the time to start looking at ourselves. And that again breaks down that feeling of isolation, and that understanding that we now have gives us a feeling that we have something to offer to others too.

So it's not like "I am on a spiritual path and you are on a worldly path, so what can I do for you?" But we actually see that through our own inner development and cultivation, there is a lot we can do for others,

and it can come out in very small but very, very significant ways. Again, if we're really tuned in to what's happening, we can connect with other people very strongly in situations where you don't even think you are going to.

I am saying this because I am just thinking of something from my personal experience. I was taking a bus from San Francisco, in one of these mini-buses at the airport, and we were all sitting there, scrunched in. I started talking to the young woman beside me who goes to university at San Jose. And now she is going to start reading Dharma books and she just wrote me a letter. At that time, I didn't just turn to her and say, "Well, you have a precious human rebirth and you should try to" You just talk to people and if you are a friendly, happy, pleasant person, you convey something to other people. It doesn't matter whether they know you are a Buddhist or not. The fact is you are really communicating with them. You can do this with people at the bank and people at the supermarket and people at your workplace.

You don't need to talk Buddhist jargon like the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, samsara, nirvana and all these stuff. You just talk basic human kindness and communicate. We see that actually, in fact, having shifted gears to making our life meaningful in a Dharma way, we actually feel more in tune with others. We actually are able to communicate better with others.

Say your friends come to you with problems. You begin very easily to be able to see, "Oh, that's because of attachment." Lots of our problems are due to attachment. Your friends come and confide in you, and you can see a problem coming from attachment or from jealousy or from pride or from anger or from making too big a deal out of oneself. And then we talk about the different antidotes to these things to people but without saying anything about Buddhism. Just talk common sense. You help them to solve their problems through Buddhist techniques (they don't know it), and as you get more familiar and you practice those techniques yourself, you will find the vocabulary to express them very simply to other people. So you shifted gears but you communicate even better with other people than before.

Feeling Small

Another thing is that all the past great masters achieved realizations based on the same human body that we have. That's important to remember because sometimes we hear stories about Milarepa and Marpa, and this great guru and that great meditator, and we go, "Oh my goodness! These people are so high and holy and look at me!" But, remember, they had the same life we did, the same precious human life, the same qualities, the same opportunities, and the thing is that they made use of their life. If we put in some effort, we can also make use of our life, we have the same qualities. So when you look at His Holiness the Dalai Lama and all of his wonderful qualities, he is a human being, just like us. If he can be like that, we can also. It is important to remember that.

It is important also, by remembering the preciousness and purpose of our life, to not waste our time. It is like if you find a diamond, and you know the worth of the diamond, you are going to really use it, you're going to use it soon, and you're not going to put it on the table and wait for a thief to come take it. We would usually feel very, very bad if we wasted our money. If we bought something and it wasn't worth the price, we'd have so much regret and repentance: "I wasted my money on this completely useless thing that broke!"

From a Buddhist point of view, getting hung up in that kind of regret is useless. What we should regret is when we waste our life, when we waste this precious opportunity we have to attain temporary and ultimate goals. When we waste our opportunity to make our life meaningful moment by moment, that is something to regret.

Questions and Answers

I will pause here and see if you have some questions because we have completed the second section.

[Audience:] What are some of the reasoning underlying the assertion that we can all attain enlightenment?

Well, because we have the Buddha potential, we have the basic substantial cause or perpetuating cause for becoming a Buddha. When something is produced, you have the substance or the thing that actually

transforms into what it's going to become; we have the tree that is the substantial cause or what we call the perpetuating cause of the paper. Then we have all of the other causes and conditions: the logger who cut it down and the paper mill and all these other stuff. We have a substantial or perpetuating cause to make something, and then we have all the conditions. Now, if you don't have a tree, if you don't have the substantial cause to become paper, there's no way you are going to get paper. You may have the logger and the paper mill but there is no way you are going to get the paper.

So the substantial cause is an important, essential element in producing the result. In a similar way, our Buddha nature is the substantial or perpetuating cause that is the basic thing that will enable us to become a Buddha. Now, talking from a tantric viewpoint, we would say that the fundamental innate mind of clear light (if you want a fancy term) is that substantial cause, or that perpetuating cause.

In other words, that extremely subtle mind, that is clear, aware and empty of inherent existence, is the basic thing that allows us to become a fully enlightened Buddha. So, just the fact of having a mindstream is all we need to have the substantial cause for becoming a Buddha.

What we need now is all of the cooperative conditions like the Dharma practice, e.g. keeping ethics, being generous, developing loving-kindness and so on. We need to engage in the different techniques and methods so that we can take that clear light mind and purify it of its obstacles, develop all of its good qualities so that it can become the mind of a Buddha.

[Audience: inaudible]

You mean like if a person before has heard something about karma but they don't really understand it, and then you're talking about loving-kindness and simple things and they say, "Well, I thought Buddhism was all about karma?"

I think if a person at that point expresses some interest in learning about reincarnation and about karma, then I think we can explain it to them, because sometimes people are curious and sometimes they might even think of it as funny. Sometimes people kind of scoff, "Do you really think we can be reborn as a duck?"

What I would do if somebody has that attitude was, at the beginning of talking about rebirth I wouldn't talk initially about being reborn as dogs, because that's stretching that person too far. I would just talk about being reborn as human beings and that a person's mindstream does go from one body to the other. There are some people who have memories and if you read their stories of how they remembered previous lives, and you tell these stories to your friends then it makes them stop and think.

It was very interesting. I was staying with my brother and I had a picture on my small traveling shrine of Serkong Rinpoche, who is my root teacher and his reincarnation who in the picture was five years old at that time. My little niece came up and asked me who are these people, so I started to explain, "This was him in the previous life and I knew him, and he died and now he is reborn as this child". She is very curious and says "I don't think that happens." But it was quite interesting, she brought it up later on in the day, she was thinking about it. She asked, "Do you really think we get born again?" So we talked about it. It's okay with me if she doesn't come out as a convert. But to get people to start to think about things like that. They begin to think, "Well, maybe I am not my body. Maybe when I die, it isn't just a big hole of nothingness. But I continue to exist and I can actually improve." So I think to explain things about karma and rebirth in a simple way, so that they get a good understanding of it.

[Audience:] What can we do to help correct some people's persistent wrong understandings of Buddhism, especially when they don't seem open to it?

So you've tried to correct their understandings and they haven't gotten it. Well, it's a thing of being sensitive and seeing when somebody is open, because you're right, sometimes people are confused and they don't seem to want to clarify their confusion right away. And so sometimes there, it is better to leave it quietly, don't talk so much directly about Buddhism, but just be a kind person so that you re-establish a good relationship with them and you continue a friendship. After some time, their mind might change and you might be able to talk about more technical things of Buddhism again.

If they come and they ask you a question, you can respond to the question. But if you get the feeling

that they're just taking everything completely backwards and upside down, then maybe just show by your example by being a kind and friendly person and leave it for right now, and then maybe they'll come around at a later date. It depends very much on the situation, each person is different. For some people, it might be like that, and we might feel like, "Wow, I don't seem to be able to explain it, but are you interested in reading a book?" Then the person might say, "Yeah, give me a book." And then you can give them a book. Sometimes, like if there is an article about the Dalai Lama or something about Tibet, then you show it to that person and they may say "Oh! This is interesting," and they get warmed up or get into it again. It really depends on each individual situation.

Difficulty of Getting A Precious Human Life

This is a very important one to understand, the difficulty, the rarity, so that we get a sense that our life is not only precious, not only meaningful, but also that it is a very special occasion. Because otherwise, if we don't see our present opportunity as rare, we can very easily fall into the thing of, "Well, it would be nice to practice Dharma, but I don't really feel like it. So I will do it next lifetime". We can keep procrastinating. We can get a little complacent and laid back.

And so this meditation is to help us realize that actually what we have now is quite special and quite rare, and it's difficult to get it again, so better use it now. There are three ways to see that:

- 1) From the viewpoint of whether it is easy or difficult to create the causes for it.
- 2) Through analogies.
- 3) From the viewpoint of its nature or from the number of beings that have precious human lives.

Through all these three ways, we can see that it is difficult and rare.

1) From the viewpoint of whether it is easy or difficult to create the causes for it.

Causes for a Precious Human Life

From the viewpoint of the cause, to create the cause for a precious human life, we need three principal causes:

- a) Good ethical behavior, good ethical conduct, because that creates the cause for us to get a human body.
- b) Doing the other far reaching attitudes -- generosity, patience, joyous effort, concentration and wisdom, because that ripens our mind so it gives us all the other qualities of a precious human life.
- c) Dedicating all of our positive potential and making very, very strong prayers to have a precious human life in the future. Because if we create a lot of positive potential, but we don't dedicate it, it can get destroyed by anger. Or, maybe it will ripen and we will get reborn in the god realm and have super-duper sense pleasure for a few eons and then it is all over and we are back to where we started again. So, it is important to dedicate it so that our karma ripens in a Dharma way.

Difficulty of creating these causes

Is it easy or difficult to create one of the principal causes for getting a precious human life? We think of the ten destructive actions; killing, stealing, unwise sexual conduct etc.

Is it easy or difficult to be patient? Somebody comes up and insults us. What is our usual reaction? Somebody cheats us. What's our usual reaction? So we can see it's really difficult. What about joyous effort like taking delight in doing constructive actions? How much of a sense of delight do we have? How much of a sense of drudgery do we have? Then "concentration". Next "wisdom". How much time do we put in a day cultivating our wisdom?

We look at these things, "Is it easy to create ethics? Is it easy or difficult to do the far-reaching attitudes? What is our habitual behavior right now? What actions do we do very well and which ones don't we? We begin to see that it's very difficult to create the causes. What we have now is really a miracle, so let's use it wisely. Let's get ourselves together, considering that we have this potential to become a Buddha, considering that we have this inner beauty. Why waste it? Let's put our energy into creating the causes for precious human rebirth and for enlightenment.

2) Through analogies.

The Blind Tortoise

We can also see from the viewpoint of analogies that it is very difficult to get a precious human rebirth. Here in the scriptures, we have a lovely story about a tortoise. There is a huge vast ocean. There is one tortoise. He is blind. He is usually at the bottom of the ocean. He comes up once every hundred years. There is a golden yolk, a golden inner tube (to update the story) floating on the ocean. What is the chance that this tortoise have, coming up once every hundred years and being blind, to stick its head through the inner tube? Pretty low, especially when you think the ocean is so vast. Sometimes, he might be thousands of miles away. Sometimes, he might be only a foot away. But still, it doesn't matter, he missed it. So try again after another hundred years.

The way the analogy relates, is: the ocean is like the ocean of cyclic existence. The tortoise is like us. Being at the bottom of the ocean is like being born in all the unfortunate realms, all the situations where it's very, very difficult and there's much confusion and pain. Coming up once every hundred years is like getting a good rebirth. That's not even a precious human rebirth, just coming up to the surface, that's like getting any kind of human rebirth, or being reborn as a god or demi-god. You are only up there for a second and then you go down again. The golden yolk, the golden inner tube, is the Buddha's teachings. So the Buddha's teachings are floating; it goes from place to place. It goes from Tibet to the West, from India to China, from Sri Lanka to Thailand, all over the place. It's never stationary. So this golden inner tube is going around; the Buddha's teachings keep changing places.

We are blinded by our ignorance, blinded by all of our misconceptions. We are usually in the unfortunate realms, and we come up to the surface once every hundred years. Putting our head through the golden yolk of the Buddha's teachings is like getting a precious human life.

When you sit there and meditate on this analogy, it gives us some sense of "Wow!" It's like I pinch myself, "Do I really have this opportunity now?" We see how precious it is.

When you are doing meditation on this, you would sit there and create the whole scene and look at the tortoise going here and there, and the teachings going here and there, and think about how it relates to us in cyclic existence. You will come out with the feeling that our life is very, very special. And again, a renewed feeling of how important it is to use it wisely.

3) From the viewpoint of its nature or from the number of beings that have precious human lives.

To see if it's rare or not to have a precious human life, we look at the numbers of beings that have precious human lives. What is the population of America now? More than 250 million? How many beings in America have precious human lives? There are a lot of human lives but how many have precious human lives? Even within America, if you compare the number of human beings to the number of animals and insects, it's just astounding. If you take Seattle; the number of human beings versus the number of animals and insects, there are so many little spiders, ants, cockroaches, beetles, butterflies, caterpillars, dogs and cats and cows and everything else. The animals and insects really outnumber the human beings.

Among the human beings, those with precious human lives are even fewer. When you start comparing the numbers of precious human lives to human beings to animals to all the other beings in all the other realms, it's a very, very small number that has precious human lives. A precious human life is very difficult to get.

One time, the Buddha bent down to scoop up a little bit of dust on his finger nail and he said, "The number of beings who have an upper rebirth, (this is not even a precious human life but a fortunate rebirth) is like the dust in my finger nail and the number of beings who have unfortunate rebirths is like all the dust in the whole world".

When we think like this, in terms of numbers, it sinks into us more and more, that this opportunity is very rare, very difficult to get. So again, this feeling comes up, "I must use it wisely. I want to get myself together and not waste the opportunity."

Review of teachings tonight

We just reviewed slightly the qualities of a precious human life, being born as a human with the sense faculties intact, having access to teachers and teachings and religious freedom, having the interest and motivation to practice the path and so on.

We talked about the purpose and the meaning of what we can do with our life, in terms of temporary goals, in other words, preparing for future lives so that we can continue with our practice, so that we can have happiness in our future lives. And we talked about ultimate goals, so that we take the essence of this life and use it to become either an arhat who has attained liberation, or a fully enlightened Buddha. We can do that on the basis of this body. Just as all the past realized beings had done it on the basis of this human body, we can also attain these ultimate goals.

And then moment by moment, we can transform every activity into part of our spiritual practice. When we sweep the floor, when we wash the dishes, we are cleaning the negative karma, the defilements of ourselves and others. When we get in the car, we know where we are going. When we answer the phone, before we answer it, we think "May I be of benefit to the other person". When we are stuck in a traffic jam, we think everybody else wants to be happy. We use every small circumstance in our life – going upstairs, going down, going in and out of the door. When you pass things to people, say you're passing the ketchup, you think mentally, "May I be able to give them the Dharma and lead them in the path." When you give people directions, you lead them on the path. In these ways, you transform ordinary things and give them a Dharma, a spiritual significance.

Once we know we have a precious human life, we know it's meaningful, then we consider its rarity and the difficulty of getting it. We do that first by thinking that it's rare. It's difficult to create the cause because it is difficult to act ethically. If we look in our world and how we act, the frequency of constructive versus destructive actions, the intensity of them, we begin to see it's quite difficult to keep good ethical conduct.

It's equally difficult being generous and patient and having joy in our practice and concentrating and being wise. All these things are difficult. In that way too, it's difficult to create the cause. In addition, once we have created the cause for a precious human life, it's easy to destroy it, because if we don't dedicate our positive potential and we get angry, we burn it up. Even if we have dedicated it, if we get angry subsequently, we postpone it from ripening. So, we begin to see it's difficult, it's hard.

Secondly, when we think in terms of the analogies, when we think of the tortoise in the huge ocean, this poor blind tortoise in its confusion trying to get its head through the golden inner tube; like our confusion in all of samsara, being blinded by our ignorance, having that opportunity to contact the Buddha's teachings and to practice them – how precious, how rare that opportunity is.

Thirdly, in terms of numbers, how difficult it is to get this opportunity. When we start looking at the number of beings in the upper realms versus the number in the lower realms, the number of animals versus the number of human beings, the number of human beings versus the number of those with precious human lives, we will see that this is a very precious opportunity, something to really value.

For instance when you get your pay check, you don't leave your pay check hanging around. When you get something valuable, you take real good care of it. From a Buddhist point of view, having this opportunity to do Dharma practice is more valuable than a pay check, more valuable than a diamond, more valuable than a promotion. Because diamonds and promotions and these things, they are here and then they are gone. How long will we have them? But if we use our precious human life and develop our own inner beauty, this result can last a very, very long time and have very far-reaching effects.

Let's sit for about 5 minutes and digest. Review the points in your mind. This is a thinking meditation, a checking meditation. Think over what we have said. Try and generate the feelings that we've talked about through thinking in this way.

*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.