

Essential Life Practices – Lama Zopa writes to a student



My very dear,

Thank you for your very kind letter, sorry for the long delay in replying. It is excellent what you have been doing. I am very happy to hear so far that you have been doing the preliminaries practices, this is so good. I am not sure if you have been doing the short or the long Calling the Guru From Afar prayer?

If it is the long version, then this is very good, because it contains the entire lam-rim in it, as well as the tantra path. This is excellent to recite as it makes one's life so worthwhile, so fortunate and this also is the foundation for developing devotion.

It is very important if you can recite one lam-rim prayer each day, such as the Three Principles of the Path, Foundation of all Good Qualities, Calling the Guru from Afar (long one) etc. Also you can recite the lam-rim prayer that is contained at the end of your deity's long sadana that contains all the stages of the common and tantric path. Each time you read it, it brings you closer to realizing the path and closer to enlightenment each day. So this means each day that you read one lam-rim prayer mindfully it brings you closer to liberating all sentient beings from the eons of samsara suffering and brings you closer to enlightening all sentient beings, which is the purpose of one's life. In this life one needs to benefit sentient beings, to work for sentient beings. That is the real meaning of life, so for this one needs to practice Dharma, to achieve the path, to cease all the numberless sufferings and causes: karma and delusion, and the negative imprints and liberate all

sentient beings from the oceans of sufferings in samsara and to enlighten them.

The other reason why one should benefit other sentient beings is that we need their help for happiness. You then – one person – or I – one person – need help from numberless sentient beings for one's own happiness. Similarly, numberless sentient beings also need your help for their happiness. So not only you need help, they need *your* help.

So now you have all the opportunities to help: You have met the Buddha Dharma. You have met the virtuous friend, who has revealed the path to enlightenment: the Dharma; you have received a perfect human body; you have the opportunity to practice Dharma, the eight freedoms and the ten richnesses, so you can practice Dharma whenever you wish. You can listen to, reflect upon, meditate on and attain the path to liberation and enlightenment.

So many sentient beings have not had the opportunity to meet the Dharma, and due to that, every day, every hour, and every minute and every second, whatever action they do with their body, speech and mind, it is all negative karma, because their motivation is either anger, ignorance or mostly it is attachment, clinging to this life. So all their motivations are non-virtuous, and all actions done with this motivation of ignorance become negative karma. Every second, every moment, it is like they are stepping over the cliffs to the lower realms. They are constantly possessed by the sickness of the three types of suffering: the suffering of suffering, the suffering of change and the all-pervasive suffering – totally possessed by demon spirit, possession of the three poisonous minds, with no freedom at all. So now you have the responsibility to liberate all sentient beings from the oceans of suffering of samsara and to bring them to enlightenment. All your past happiness since beginningless rebirth, as well as present and future happiness, not only samsara happiness but ultimate happiness: liberation and enlightenment, every good thing you have experienced has been received by the kindness of each and every sentient being. Now what is most important is for you to develop yourself, this is what is most beneficial for all sentient beings, for you to study and understand the lam rim, and achieve the lam-rim by meditating on it.

So it is very important to read one lam-rim text from beginning to end every day. Then to do, each day, one meditation on guru devotion, follow the outlines from the lam-rim, and continue like this until you have stable realizations that come from deep in your heart, that one guru is all

the Buddhas and all the Buddhas are your guru. After that, you still need to stabilize this realization, so continue to meditate a little bit each day on guru devotion. No matter how many weeks, months, years or lifetimes it takes.

The other important thing is to devote one session a day to meditating on the lam-rim, starting from the beginning, from perfect human rebirth, so maybe for one month mainly focus your session on that, then next month on the usefulness, then one month on the difficulties to receive, etc. So keep going like this up to karma. Keep doing this until you achieve all the realizations, step by step.

Then every day try to do one meditation on emptiness, using the four-point analysis, the short or elaborate way. So you can use different techniques to meditate on emptiness. Also you can recite the Heart Sutra slowly, meditating on the meaning. In this way, each day you that you are alive, you are leaving so many positive imprints of the Three Principles of the Path to enlightenment.

First thing when you wake up in the morning rejoice that you are still alive, and that again you have the opportunity to practice Dharma. Remember impermanence and death: Think how fortunate you are, by thinking about the eight freedoms and the ten richnesses, having a perfect human body, so you can achieve the three great means in just one lifetime. Remember that life is impermanent and death can happen at any time. After this life it is not sure where one will be born; it could be in the lower realms. If one is reborn there, apart from the most important fact that one would be unable to help other sentient beings, also one would have no opportunity to practice Dharma, and one's suffering would be so heavy and for an unimaginable length of time. Also one has not been reborn in the higher realms, even that is not sufficient, as I have mentioned before, that is not the real meaning of life. In samsara there is only suffering life, constant suffering, the suffering of change, which in samsara we call pleasure and the pervasive compounded suffering.

So until one is free from suffering, there is not one second break or holiday in samsara, this is how it is experienced, since beginningless rebirth. I have been suffering in samsara and only experiencing sufferings so I must be liberated from samsara, I must achieve enlightenment, there is no other solution.

Then meditate on the seven-point cause and effect outline from the bodhichitta section of the lam-rim. The next day you can focus on equalizing oneself and others. Then

exchanging oneself with others. Then in the break time you can do tong-len practice. After that think that all sentient beings become enlightened. So this is just mere visualization: Really, sentient beings are still suffering, so I must liberate all sentient beings from all the sufferings and the causes and bring them to enlightenment, by myself alone, therefore I must achieve enlightenment, therefore I will do all my activities from the bodhichitta mind, every activity I do during the day and night such as eating, sleeping, walking, going to work, study, everything. Whatever action of my body, speech and mind will then become a cause of enlightenment.

Then do Lama Tsong Khapa Guru Yoga each day.

Then chant "OM MANI PADME HUM" each day, to get the commitment done.

I am very happy that you are doing the Thirty-five Buddhas on the train: Even doing the visualization and reciting the names is extremely important, and very worthwhile to do, if you cannot do the prostrations. Also you can put your hands in the mudra of prostration as you recite the names, and visualize that you are prostrating.

Taking the Eight Mahayana precepts twice a month is unbelievable – great, and so fantastic!

If you do the long Calling the Guru From Afar, then as I mentioned in the beginning, this has the whole lam-rim within it. If you do the short one, then it is good to do one lam-rim prayer each day that contains the whole path, such as Foundation of all Good Qualities, Three Principles of the Path etc.

You can do this within the practice of Lama Tsong Khapa Guru Yoga. Before the Guru absorbs into you, you stop, and at that time recite the lam-rim prayer, slowly, mindfully, reflecting on the meaning.

The Guru Shakyamuni Buddha Daily Meditation booklet has the lam-rim prayers within the practice, so you can do a different lam-rim prayer each day. The lam-rim prayer has the complete path in it, this is so important. Also you can read lam-rim on the train, this is extremely worthwhile, so you don't always have to do it on the meditation cushion – you can do it in the car, when you are walking, doing shopping, you don't have to be sitting. So in this way, take all the opportunities to practice.

Thank you very much, please continue what you have been doing, it is great! ☸

With much love and prayers,
Lama Zopa

Scribe Ven. Holly Ansett, November 2006 at Kachoe Dechen Ling, California.