



# *Letter to a Disciple in Retreat*

From Lama Zopa Rinpoche



*The following is a letter from Lama Zopa Rinpoche to a student who had been in retreat for fifteen months.*

The meaning of our lives is to achieve enlightenment in order to enlighten all sentient beings. This is the only reason for living and the only goal. When we have this motivation, everything we do is meaningful – walking, sleeping, talking, even having a breakfast of Vegemite or french fries!

You are making the best progress in your retreat because you are seeing lam-rim more and more deeply. This means your retreat is benefiting your mind. You have developed a very deep realization of how terrible samsara is. You understand it is nothing but suffering. You know you have experienced rebirth in samsara numberless times and continuing to reincarnate in this samsara is incredibly unbearable and disgusting.

This sort of realization is very important. We need to experience the suffering of samsara as unbearable and totally in the nature of suffering – not only the suffering of pain and the suffering of change, but also pervasive compounded suffering. This means the aggregates themselves are in the very nature of suffering.

Not only is samsara in the nature of suffering, but what we perceive as happiness often results from committing negative actions. These negative actions plant seeds of delusion in our minds. More delusion arises from that seed, and more negative karma arises from that delusion. In this way, we constantly create the cause of compounded suffering.



Being in samsara is unbearable, like being in a fire or drowning in a septic tank. The delusions are awful. Attachment is particularly terrible, like a poisonous snake that kills you instantly. But even if you are bitten by all the snakes in the world, all that happens is you are separated from your body of this life. Dying from a snake bite doesn't prevent you from generating virtuous thoughts, being liberated, or achieving enlightenment. Just being bitten by a snake and dying from it doesn't cause you to be born in the lower realms. Snake bites are not a condition for being born in the lower realms; delusions cause us to be born in the lower realms. First we have delusion, and that delusion creates negative karma. That negative karma is the cause of being born in the lower realms. Therefore, delusion is more dangerous than an atomic bomb. It harms you and numberless sentient beings, and it has been harming you for countless lifetimes. If you don't eliminate your delusion, it will continue to directly and indirectly harm you and sentient beings forever. This is much worse than a billion atomic bombs. This is the essence of what I am saying.

Realizing how harmful the delusions are and generating disgust for them is an excellent foundation for realizing shamatha – calm abiding. Once you realize how unbearable samsara is, you are less distracted by scattering thoughts of attachment. There is less disturbance in your mind. The more you renounce delusion and the suffering nature of samsara, the more content and peaceful the mind becomes. Then it is so easy to achieve calm abiding.

The more you realize renunciation from samsara and feel how harmful the delusions are, the more you can truly see the suffering of sentient beings. You can feel others' suffering so clearly. In this way, your compassion becomes stronger and it is very easy to generate bodhichitta, which leads you to enlightenment. Once you are enlightened, you can enlighten all sentient beings

Normally in this world, someone is considered a hero if they defeat many countries in battle. However, how can we regard that person as a hero when they have to suffer the karmic results of those actions for eons? How can this person who is now suffering inconceivably in the hell realms be considered a hero? That person is not a hero at all.



Every day, the lam-rim meditator defeats delusions. Actually, when I was dictating this letter, I accidentally said “defeats lam-rim.” That is what I have been practicing and what many of us are practicing all the time. We are not practicing the cause of happiness and making the mind the source of happiness. All your happiness from momentary happiness up to your enlightenment and the enlightenment of all sentient beings comes from your lam-rim realizations.

The problem is that we follow what our self-cherishing wants and what our attachment wants. Our ignorance trusts our self-cherishing. Our ignorance thinks our self-cherishing is truly existent. Because of this, we cannot realize guru devotion, the three principal aspects of the path, or anything else.

Defeat the delusions every day. As soon as you defeat the delusions, even if you can only do it once a month, you become the greatest victor. Normally, warriors who kill hundreds of thousands and millions of people are called great champions, but they never defeat the inner enemy of delusion. Instead, they follow that inner enemy their whole lives. You can see the huge difference between the normal warrior and the lam-rim meditator. The lam-rim meditator is actually making war on their delusions. By actualizing the lam-rim path, they are making war in the world of their minds and they are defeating the real enemy.

It is only by actualizing the lam-rim path and completely eliminating the cause of delusion, the negative imprints, that you are able to free yourself forever from delusions. Once you do that, you are totally free from the oceans of each realm’s suffering and you have no outside enemies. You have no outside enemies because you have not created the cause to receive harm from others, and that lasts forever. This makes you the greatest champion, because then you are able to bring numberless sentient beings of the six realms to the peerless happiness of enlightenment.

Those who have sacrificed their lives to meditate on the lam-rim are the real champions. This is also the real work for world peace. Taming your own mind brings peace to the world, to numberless sentient beings. This is what brings light to their hearts and to their lives.



Every morning when you get up, remember that you are working for world peace. You are giving peace to sentient beings and you will continue working for them by meditating on the lam-rim. Whatever action you do – not only during the sessions, but also in the break time when you are washing or going to the toilet or whatever – remember to think like this. Your motivation is to benefit every single sentient being in this world, including your family, all the terrorists, all the people who are violent, those who are torturing others, those who are suffering, those who are sick, those who are dying today, the millions of people who are dying of cancer, etc. You are benefiting every single one – every fish, every shellfish, every animal living in the water or on the beach, every single fly, all those suffering in Africa where the people are chopping up other human beings, terrifying, killing, and raping others.

Every day during *Guru Puja* when you are taking the bodhisattva vows, remember how you are benefiting sentient beings. When you chant one mala of OM MANI PÄDME HUM or even just a few mantras, make sure you do it with bodhichitta motivation to benefit all sentient beings. Every mantra you recite, every meditation you do, everything you do in your house or outside, every time you see a bird, every time you walk, do it with bodhichitta motivation. Then you are truly benefiting others.

Even though meditating on the lam-rim and defeating the delusions doesn't stop suffering right away, taming the mind sets a precedent. Every time you defeat delusion for even one minute, every time you practice patience or renunciation, every time you avoid desire, every time you meditate on dependent arising, every time you see things as empty, every time you avoid the ignorance grasping at true existence – this leads you to total cessation of suffering and the cause of suffering, delusion and karma. By renouncing samsara, actualizing the path, and directly perceiving emptiness, you are able to offer so many qualities to benefit others. You are able to liberate others from the cause of suffering and lead them to enlightenment. Each day you practice Dharma – guru devotion, the three principles of the path, bodhichitta, and tantra – you come closer to being able to liberate others.



Generate bodhichitta in every motivation. Then definitely everything you do leads to enlightenment. Once you reach enlightenment, you have all qualities, all realizations, perfect understanding omniscience, perfect compassion, and perfect power to be able to perfectly liberate all sentient beings and bring them to enlightenment. You are able to perform perfect works for sentient beings spontaneously and without effort.

This is how practicing the lam-rim allows us to benefit every single sentient being. If you can practice like this, that would be amazing! Normally, people think that becoming king of a country or defeating other countries is something unbelievable, but in reality, if you don't renounce the cause of suffering, you have nothing.

Each time you do a lam-rim meditation, you remove the cause of suffering. In the beginning, generate a bodhichitta motivation to be able to end the cause of suffering forever. Think that every minute sentient beings stay in samsara is unbearable. Especially now that you are able to live in an isolated place, free from distractions, you should meditate on the lam-rim every day, every minute. This is the practice.

To me, the most important thing in the world is dedicating our lives to achieve lam-rim, the root of the path which is guru devotion, the three principles of the path, and the common and uncommon two stages with the goal to liberate numberless hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, human beings, suras, and asuras from the oceans of suffering of each realm and bring them to enlightenment.

Great scholars and great pandits have so much knowledge. They know everything by heart – even the entire *Kangyur* and *Tengyur* – and know everything about the four traditions and also Bön, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, etc. But if they are not meditating on the path, not practicing Dharma, not overcoming and destroying delusions, which are their own inner enemy and the outer enemy of all sentient beings, even though they know so much, their lives do not have much meaning. Their lives are empty. If they are not practicing, their minds become like a library, but that is all. They are not making their minds useful even for liberating themselves, not to mention achieving enlightenment and enlightening all sentient beings. They don't use their knowledge even to achieve a good rebirth in the next



life and avoid rebirth in the lower realms, which is the minimum requirement for practicing Dharma. Therefore, their lives are totally empty. It is like collecting all the medicine in the world and storing it up, but not taking it when you are sick. It is like buying all the food in the world, but not eating it and then dying of starvation.

Defeating anger or attachment even one time is better than winning the Olympics a billion times! Defeating one negative imprint plants a seed in your mental continuum and that becomes one less negative karma you have to experience. If you do not defeat it, delusion arises again and again from that negative imprint, and you have to circle in samsara and continuously experience the suffering results for so many lifetimes. From that one negative karma, you experience hundreds of thousands of lifetimes of suffering. Not only that, you also develop the habit of repeating that negative action again in each lifetime, and in this way you create suffering again and again for so many future lifetimes.

But you don't have to experience this. You are free. Olympic champions don't receive this benefit even if they win a billion times. If they win and they do it with attachment, pride, or clinging to this life, then their winning is negative karma and it brings them closer to the lower realms.

Try to develop renunciation, compassion, bodhichitta, and emptiness during your retreat. You should generate strong feeling of lam-rim at the beginning of your sessions. It doesn't have to take long; just five minutes. Missing the opportunity to practice like this is worse than having lost billions of dollars!

With much love and prayers,

Lama Zopa



### *Colophon:*

Letter from Lama Zopa Rinpoche to a student who had been in retreat for fifteen months. Scribed by Ven. Holly Ansett, November 2006, Kacho Dechen Ling. Edited by Venerable Gyalten Mindrol, FPMT Education Department, April 2007.