



LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE'S TEACHINGS ON THOUGHT TRANSFORMATION DURING THE TIME OF COVID-19

By Carina Rumrill

THE TIME TO PRACTICE IS NOW

Hardships and opportunities may seem like conflicting concepts but they often are two sides of the same coin. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has often explained that as difficult as it was to lose Tibet to China starting in 1950, it became a condition for Tibetan Buddhism to spread throughout the world due to His Holiness and other Tibetan masters traveling extensively following their exile. People in countries around the world were able to attend teachings for the first time with authentic Tibetan teachers. This is an example of how a devastating situation created the cause for a positive result.

Similarly, the novel coronavirus pandemic has created sickness, death, fear, and economic hardship globally, but it has also created opportunities to

practice Dharma more deeply. In fact, when we know how to practice thought transformation, we can utilize everything—unfavorable situations, undesirable circumstances, and even pleasure and happiness—in the path to enlightenment. By transforming any difficulties that the coronavirus creates into happiness, instead of being afraid of getting it, we can rejoice in the difficulties because they give us exactly what we need—a test of the progress we have made in our Dharma practice and a chance to put the Dharma into practice and gain its benefits because we have absolutely no time to waste! This is the message that Lama Zopa Rinpoche is emphasizing in his *Teachings on Thought Transformation during the Time of COVID-19* series.

A photograph of Lama Zopa Rinpoche, a Buddhist teacher, sitting on a patterned couch. He is wearing maroon robes over a yellow shirt and has his hands clasped in his lap. Behind him is a large, vibrant Tibetan Buddhist thangka depicting a complex hierarchy of deities and figures. The thangka is flanked by vertical borders with intricate geometric patterns. In the foreground, there are yellow and orange fabric items and some papers on a white lace tablecloth.

LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE
ON THE "TEACHING
COUCH" IN HIS ROOM AT
KOPAN MONASTERY,
NEPAL, MARCH 2020.
PHOTO BY VEN. ROGER
KUNSANG

THE CORONAVIRUS HAS MADE IT POSSIBLE FOR RINPOCHE TO GIVE THESE EXTENSIVE TEACHINGS

Instead of traveling the world to give teachings as usual, Rinpoche has remained at Kopan Monastery in Nepal since March 2020. While there, Rinpoche has used his time to connect with his international students, many of whom were navigating fear, uncertainty, and confusion created by the new pandemic conditions, through video teachings. Of course, even before the virus manifested, when Rinpoche was still traveling the world to give teachings, Rinpoche's wisdom was accessible to anyone with a computer, internet access, and the wish to connect. This was made possible through livestreaming Rinpoche's teachings for the last twelve years and subsequently uploading them to the FPMT media pages under "[Rinpoche Available Now](#)" complete with transcripts and summaries. What makes these teachings special is, as Rinpoche himself explained:

"Usually I don't have freedom of time. There is a limitation of one week or two weeks, so I can't finish a lot of my teachings. Here, because there is no limitation of time, I can give as many teachings as I planned for the people who are listening."

Since March, FPMT International Office has been sharing summaries of Rinpoche's teachings and links to the videos, transcripts, and practice materials associated with each on FPMT.org as well as in the daily FPMT News and on social media. (You can read an article about the behind the scenes process for getting these teachings to you, as well as more on the origins of this series on page 42.) With ninety videos recorded and shared as of the end of 2020, Rinpoche is indicating that these teachings will continue well into the new year.

Setting the Motivation for Listening to the Teachings

At the beginning of each video teaching, Rinpoche reminds us to set a correct motivation—bodhichitta—for listening to the teachings. Rinpoche explains that we should think:

"For myself alone to achieve happiness, even liberation from samsara forever, is not the real meaning or purpose of my life. The real meaning of my life is to not harm others and to benefit them as much as possible. Therefore, I must liberate

the numberless sentient beings from the oceans of samsaric sufferings and, not only that, I must bring them to the peerless happiness of full enlightenment, the total cessation of obscurations and the completion of all realizations, by myself alone. To do that perfectly, I must achieve the state of omniscience. Therefore, I'm going to listen to this teaching for every single sentient being in the numberless universes."

In many videos Rinpoche offers an elaborate motivation in which he speaks extensively about the benefits of generating bodhichitta—both for ourselves and others. Using Rinpoche's motivation, we invite you to join us in exploring some of the main topics Rinpoche has been emphasizing in this unique and important online teaching event.

The Meaning of Thought Transformation or *Lojong*

Rinpoche calls this teaching series "thought transformation" (*lojong* in Tibetan). While reminding us that the whole lamrim is for thought transformation and that all 84,000 teachings of Buddha are for the purpose of subduing, benefiting, and transforming our minds, Rinpoche points out that in addition to lamrim there is a specific lamrim *lojong*, which will be the topic of these teachings. The lamrim *lojong* that Rinpoche has been referring to can be found in verses [LC91-100 of Lama Chopal](#).

At the beginning of many of the teaching sessions, Rinpoche explains that *lojong* is about utilizing suffering and happiness in the path to enlightenment. Whatever unfavorable conditions happen, instead of thinking "poor me," we use them for our own advantage, and thus, the advantage of others. That means we use these situations not just to achieve temporary happiness for ourselves for a few days or a few hours, and not even to achieve ultimate happiness, liberation from samsara forever. Rather, we use them to achieve the peerless happiness of full enlightenment so that we become fully qualified to liberate the numberless sentient beings—which means everyone, not just the sentient beings that you like or who are kind to you—from the oceans of samsaric sufferings, which they have been experiencing from beginningless rebirths, and then bring them to enlightenment, the total cessation of obscurations and the completion of realizations.

LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE, KOPAN
MONASTERY, NOVEMBER 2020.
PHOTO BY VEN. LOBSANG SHERAB.



In addition, when we practice lojong we also use pleasure for all sentient beings. Instead of wasting our life chasing after temporary pleasures and happiness, we can make it the most beneficial, whether we are suffering or happy, by using both for sentient beings. Then everything we experience becomes meaningful because everything in our life is for others. Enemy, friend, stranger—everyone is included here. In this way, the aim of practicing lojong is huge—it is bigger than the sky.

All Happiness and All Suffering Come from Our Mind

Throughout the thought transformation teaching series, Rinpoche emphasizes that however much samsaric suffering we experience and whether we become enlightened or not all comes from our mind. *We* are responsible for our mind and therefore, our life. Every day, every hour, every minute, every second, we have the opportunity to decide if we want to be enlightened or continue to suffer. This all depends on how we take care of our mind.

A non-virtuous mind leads to negative actions, the cause of suffering, and a virtuous, healthy mind results in positive actions, the cause of happiness. Because of this, Rinpoche says, we should come to the conclusion that we must work on improving our own

minds. This is why we need to listen to the teachings of the Buddha, study, and meditate. It is not just for peace of mind, to have a quiet life, or to achieve serenity, but to transform our mind into the path to enlightenment.

If we have the karma to get the coronavirus, Rinpoche says, it is not possible to escape it—not even by hiding ourselves in the depths of the ocean or under a huge mountain—because it is our own obscured mind that created the cause to get this sickness due to negative karma. We typically have the mistaken view that anything that pleases or harms us comes from outside. We, therefore, believe that the methods to stop harm and to achieve happiness are to deal with and change the outside world, forgetting about the mind. However, the main work we need to do is to change our own mind.



**WATCH THE VIDEO:
BECAUSE THE VIRUS CAME FROM
YOUR MIND YOU NEED TO SUBDU
YOUR OWN MIND.**

We *need* hardships in order to overcome our delusions and gain realizations, Rinpoche explains. Buddhism is not easy.



STUFFED RABBIT WITH
DHARMA MESSAGE
COMPOSED BY LAMA
ZOPA RINPOCHE, KOPAN
MONASTERY, NEPAL,
NOVEMBER 2020. PHOTO
BY VEN. LOBSANG SHERAB.

To go deep into Buddhism, we have to dedicate our life to it and make sacrifices. Without self-discipline, our life is filled with so much suffering. There's no peace and unbelievable dissatisfaction. We have to practice contentment, patience, compassion, and loving-kindness—all qualities of a good human being. Without doing this, our whole life is filled with suffering.

If we don't know Dharma, particularly the lamrim, we can become angry, give rise to heresy, and commit the heaviest negative karma of criticizing and losing faith in the guru, Rinpoche explains. If we know lamrim and are practicing it well, we are so fortunate. Without Dharma, even worldly activities that look good at the beginning will fail in the end, including the homes we buy, the bodies we cherish, and the careers we cultivate. However, with Dharma, the result never decreases, it always increases until we achieve enlightenment.

Buddha taught a method to become free from sickness, old age, and death, which is the whole path to enlightenment. Without Dharma, we have no method to become free from

dissatisfaction; but by knowing that everything comes from our mind, we have great freedom because everything is in our hands.

Rinpoche emphasizes how fortunate we are to have met the Mahayana teachings, and to learn and practice Dharma. However, we don't take advantage of the opportunities we have and get carried away by wave upon wave of attachment, anger, and ignorance, and are completely under their control, so much so that we waste our human life. Therefore, it is so important for us to use our perfect human rebirth to practice Dharma before it's too late.

By practicing the lamrim, with morality as the basis, we develop the inspiration and energy to stop our habit of non-virtue. Instead of becoming habituated to negative karma, we develop the habit of living our life with bodhichitta and the awareness of emptiness. So, if possible, we should get into the habit of meditating on emptiness no matter what we are doing. And by developing the habit of bodhichitta, the good heart—wow—this is like making our life into a priceless diamond.

The Uniqueness of Rinpoche's Thought Transformation Teachings

Even those accustomed to Rinpoche's live teaching style will find this video series quite unique in both Rinpoche's approach to and presentation of the Dharma. Rinpoche at times shows the aspect of what he himself calls "the Lawudo comedian," with a variety of theatrical voice and sound effects, contortions of the face, and dramatic movements of the body. While people listening to Rinpoche for the first time might be wondering what planet Rinpoche is visiting us from, or in what kind of mind-altering substance he might be imbibing, those familiar with the unpredictable ways Rinpoche can manifest have reported being not only amused and entertained by Rinpoche's antics, but deeply moved by the lengths Rinpoche is going to in order to reach out to us and inspire us to change our thick, fixed, rock-hard minds.

Rinpoche begins each teaching by addressing his listeners as "My most dear, precious, most kind, and wish-fulfilling students, friends, all the fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, all the sentient beings." This poignant and touching style is the epitome of the warm "family feeling" that FPMT has been cultivating since the very early days. Rinpoche reminds us how we are all interconnected and dependent on others for our happiness.

Rinpoche has also brought many "friends" to the teachings. More than twenty-five stuffed animals with profound words of wisdom written on their bodies have joined Rinpoche on the teaching couch at various times, and Rinpoche has delighted in sharing their messages with us. For example, a fuzzy rabbit friend declares, "I know so many animals like to eat rabbit meat beside human beings. I want them all to bliss out by giving myself to them."



WATCH THE VIDEO: LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE INTRODUCES DHARMA STUFFED ANIMALS

In November 2020, during the recording of the teachings, Rinpoche engaged in both serious and humorous debate with Ven. Tenzin Gache, an American monk studying at Sera Je Monastery, on a variety of topics mostly related to emptiness. These debates make us examine our own understanding of often difficult topics as we try to imagine what we ourselves would answer if we were in Ven. Gache's challenging place! With the thought of debating Rinpoche ourselves on this difficult subject matter, one might conjure an image of a deer stopped dead in its tracks by headlights, but listening to and watching Rinpoche kindly and patiently debate with Ven. Gache offers us a behind-the-scenes and rare opportunity to see this style of debate being conducted in English.

All of these examples are skillful methods that Rinpoche has intentionally been using to reach out in a myriad of ways to his students who may have grown too accustomed to hearing "the same old teachings." He is telling us in every possible way that what we need to do is practice *RIGHT NOW!* This is the *one time* that we have received a perfect human rebirth—it is very short, which we can recognize by contemplating death and impermanence; it is not easily obtained again; and it is *soooooooooo* very precious! We *CANNOT* waste it!



WATCH THE VIDEO: RECOGNIZING IMPERMANENCE DEATH REMINDS YOU TO PRACTICE DHARMA RIGHT NOW!

Rinpoche has also interwoven into his teachings a large number of quotations from various sutras and important texts, including Chen Nga Lodro Gyaltsen's *Opening the Door of Dharma*, Shantideva's *Bodhicharyavatara*, Kyabje Khunu Lama Rinpoche's *Praise to Bodhichitta*, Bodhisattva Togme Sangpo's *Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva*, and Zhabkar Tshogdrug Rangdrol's *Ten Innermost Jewels of the Kadampas*. He has also cited Phabongkha Rinpoche's *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* and his commentary on Lama Tsongkhapa's *Three Principal Aspects of the Path* in his teachings on emptiness, and his meditation text *The Heart's Utmost Need* to explain death and impermanence.

In addition, Rinpoche has bestowed various oral transmissions and allowed them to be received by listening to the recording. These include various texts and mantras that Rinpoche considers useful to recite during the pandemic, either to put an end to the virus or to help the people and animals affected by it. You can learn all about the practices, oral transmissions, and mantra advice and opportunities Rinpoche has shared with us beginning on page 30.

We highly encourage you to take the time to watch the videos to see Rinpoche in action and to get a firsthand taste of these incredibly special teachings. In the accompanying transcripts, you can find the many quotations that Rinpoche has been citing from sutras and other sources, which you can add to your "diarrhea book" (Rinpoche's comical way of referring to our diary or notebook). Only in this way will you receive the full effect of what Rinpoche has been offering to us and we hope will continue to offer us for many more months. We are *soooooooooo* fortunate!

In the following pages, we offer a very broad summary of the main subjects from Rinpoche's video teachings from March through November 2020. There are many other subjects that Rinpoche goes into and the best way to receive the whole series is to engage in as many of the videos and transcripts as possible.

LAMA ZOPA
RINPOCHE WALKING
DURING A PUJA
BREAK, KOPAN
MONASTERY,
NOVEMBER 2020.
PHOTO BY VEN.
LOBSANG SHERAB.



So far in this series, Rinpoche has focused on explaining what he calls preliminary subjects to the actual lojong teachings he indicates are still coming. These preliminary subjects have mainly been perfect human rebirth and death and impermanence, with more recent detailed teachings dedicated to the subject of emptiness, which we only touch on in this article.

In addition, as is Rinpoche's style, he has talked at length about different ways in which to develop compassion and bodhichitta for sentient beings as a motivation for how to live our life. While these teachings were given with the coronavirus as the backdrop, this timeless wisdom can be used to help us persevere through *all* of life's challenges. Please enjoy!

WE NEED TO TRAIN IN THOUGHT TRANSFORMATION GRADUALLY

Right now we think that all our suffering is caused by others or external conditions. We point to and blame sources outside ourselves, often other people, for our unhappiness, but actually it's our own self-cherishing mind that brings us problems and suffering. The purpose of lojong is to utilize any difficulty, obstacle, or enemy as a remedy to our self-cherishing thought so we can actually *enjoy* any problem. This might sound like too much to aspire toward—how can we enjoy our problems?! Problems are terrible! We *can* enjoy them, Rinpoche says, if we practice wisely. In this way, poison (problems) becomes medicine for us rather than the usual cause of more suffering for ourselves and others. By experiencing suffering with bodhichitta—conventional and absolute—we can make it useful. For example, if we get the coronavirus, we can utilize it in the path to enlightenment. It becomes a quick way to purify our negative karma collected since beginningless rebirths and to achieve enlightenment. By generating happiness toward our suffering, and even welcoming it, all undesirable things become a support for our Dharma practice.

To think like this, we have to train our minds. If we can't yet utilize big discomforts and suffering in the path to enlightenment, we can start with small problems. When we start transforming small suffering into happiness, we can develop a greater and greater capacity for transforming bigger and bigger problems. Then, eventually, we can transform even huge problems into happiness. We can do this because happiness and suffering depend on how we interpret things. If happiness and suffering came from the outside, then everyone would experience things in the same way. However, the same situation can happen to two people, and their interpretation of it can be completely different—one person is angry, the other person is happy. This is because happiness and suffering come from our mind.

Tonglen

Tonglen, which Rinpoche touches on as one way of practicing lojong, is a practice in which we willingly take upon ourselves the suffering and negative karma of others and give our body, possessions, and merits to them. It is not meant to be used to stop our own pain and suffering, or to receive our own temporary day-to-day pleasure in life, Rinpoche explains. Instead we contemplate others' suffering in order to develop love (the wish for them to be happy) and compassion (the wish for them to be free from suffering). This love and compassion in turn act as a support for developing bodhichitta, the wish to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. Taking others' suffering on ourselves when we are experiencing problems is like transforming *kaka* into gold. If we cherish others, there is no space in our heart for negativity, and we can be happy all the time.

VERY SHORT TONGLEN PRACTICE

Motivated by compassion, visualize taking all the suffering and the causes of suffering in the form of dark smoke from one or more sentient beings visualized in front of you. The smoke absorbs into your heart and destroys your self-cherishing thought, your real enemy, which has made you suffer since beginningless rebirths in samsara, Rinpoche explains. You take upon yourself all the suffering and the causes of suffering and use them like a bomb or a missile to destroy your self-cherishing thought. The self-cherishing thought, which cherishes the I that your ignorance believes exists from its own side, *totally* disappears. Meditate on the emptiness of the I for a little while. Then generate the motivation of loving kindness and visualize giving away your body, enjoyments, and merits. Through this, the sentient beings you have visualized get what they want (temporary happiness), and also get what they need (ultimate happiness).

LEFT: LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE GIVING ADVICE TO THE MONK STAFF OF KOPAN MONASTERY, AUGUST 2020. PHOTO BY VEN. LOBSANG SHERAB.

USING THE MEDITATIONS ON PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH AND ON DEATH AND IMPERMANENCE AS PREPARATIONS FOR ENGAGING IN THOUGHT TRANSFORMATION

This Perfect Human Rebirth

Reminding us of the preciousness of a perfect human rebirth is central to Rinpoche's thought transformation teachings. It is as if Rinpoche is begging us to wake up to this incredibly rare opportunity we are taking for granted. By transforming the ignorant mind that doesn't see the preciousness of this perfect human rebirth into the realization of how extremely precious it is, we become inspired to use our human mind and every moment of our life to practice Dharma—while we have it.

“By recognizing how this perfect human rebirth is most precious, you don't waste time,” Rinpoche explains. “You don't easily waste your precious human rebirth. You do only meaningful things! You choose meaningful things, even the *most* meaningful things.”

This favorable human life with the eight freedoms and ten richnesses is extremely precious because, having met the Dharma, we also have all the conditions necessary to practice it. But this perfect human rebirth is rare and difficult to find again—because it is difficult to create its causes (mainly pure morality). By utilizing everything that happens to us, even misery and suffering—including the coronavirus or whatever other problems arise—in the path to enlightenment with bodhichitta, we can make our life useful to every single sentient being! This is why it is so important to use our perfect human rebirth to practice thought transformation.

In addition to being rare, this human life is short. We should not throw this opportunity away like we would used toilet paper. It is important not to die regretting that we neglected to learn and practice Dharma; we wasted our life being distracted by and a slave to attachment, anger, and jealousy. In particular, when we are happy we can easily become lazy. Rather than practicing Dharma and turning away from the eight worldly concerns, we find it very easy to follow our delusions. We then create so much negative karma, the cause to “burn like firewood in hell,” Rinpoche explains. We also become no better than animals and end up squandering this precious human life.

Even though we don't like suffering, we run toward it and, though we want happiness, we destroy it because we are totally ignorant of the causes of suffering and the causes of happiness.

We are born as a human being this one time but then we use our human mind, intelligence, and capacities in the wrong way, causing ourselves and others so much harm. And even if we come to know a lot of Dharma, we don't use this opportunity to change our minds and so we don't achieve realizations. By recognizing how precious the human rebirth is, we won't waste it on meaningless activities.

Those who have received not only a human body but a perfect human rebirth and have met the Dharma are unbelievably fortunate because they can use it to achieve the three great meanings: a higher rebirth, liberation from samsara, and enlightenment. By relying on Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and protecting our karma—abandoning non-virtue and creating virtue by practicing morality, such as by taking and keeping vows, we receive a higher rebirth. By practicing the three higher trainings of morality, concentration, and wisdom, we become free from samsara. And by generating compassion and bodhichitta, we achieve enlightenment for sentient beings.

What We Can Do with Our Perfect Human Rebirth

WE CAN USE OUR PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH TO CORRECTLY FOLLOW A VIRTUOUS FRIEND

With this perfect human rebirth we can find a guru, a virtuous friend, who can guide us to enlightenment. Once we have identified someone who possesses the necessary qualities, it is important to correctly follow that guru. To do this, we need to transform our ordinary thought that sees the guru as a normal being into a pure devotional thought that sees the guru as a buddha. This involves a total transformation of our mind that allows us to receive the blessings of the buddhas and gain the realizations of the path to enlightenment. As Rinpoche says, all the holy actions of the buddhas manifest in the guru and every atom of the guru is the numberless buddhas. Thus, correctly following the guru is the quickest way to become free from the oceans of samsaric sufferings and achieve enlightenment.

Unless we have omniscience or very high clairvoyance, we aren't able to see others' minds and we can't tell who is

enlightened. The buddhas take different forms to benefit sentient beings depending on the mind of the being. Because at the moment our mind is so obscured, we cannot see a buddha in the aspect of a buddha. The only way we can see the guru is in human form with an ordinary aspect—as having delusions and showing mistaken actions. This is currently the only way for the guru to guide us.

Therefore, when we see mistakes in our guru's actions, we should think that the guru is purposely showing us the aspect of mistakes because our mind is so obscured and defiled that if the guru didn't show themselves in this way, we wouldn't be able to see or communicate with them, and therefore we wouldn't be able to receive vows, teachings, and so forth from them. In this way, the guru is kinder than all the buddhas for manifesting in an ordinary aspect. Actually, we are fortunate even to have enough good karma to be able to see the guru in human form, rather than as a donkey or mouse! The guru's kindness is like the limitless sky.

Rinpoche goes over the eight benefits of correctly following the virtuous friend and the eight shortcomings of not doing so. (See chapter 8 in *Liberation of the Palm of Your Hand*.) We need to understand these well because when our guru is sweet and speaks nice words to us, or gives us presents, we are happy and pleased with them. But if our guru scolds us or shows they are displeased with us, our tendency is to give them up, to throw them away like garbage. Rinpoche asks, How can we achieve enlightenment if we give up the guru when the guru does something that our self-cherishing thought doesn't like? Instead, we should remember the eight benefits and shortcomings and keep our devotion strong and stable. We should also remember that when the guru scolds us, all the buddhas are scolding us. A Buddha cannot have anger, it is not possible, so they do this to help purify our negative karma. Likewise, when the guru is praising us, we should rejoice thinking that all the buddhas are so pleased with us.

Rinpoche gives the example of Milarepa, who became enlightened, not only in one life, but in a brief lifetime of degenerate times through the extreme hardships he endured under the guidance of his teacher Marpa. To the outside it looked like he was the most unfortunate person: kicked out of teachings, scolded, and even beaten; but, internally, his bearing these difficulties caused the strongest purification and became the quickest way for him to achieve enlightenment. In fact, when we bear hardships by following our guru's advice or to fulfill their wishes, it is equivalent to doing the preliminary practices many hundreds of thousands of times. Even if the work is very hard and fraught with problems and difficulties, it becomes something to enjoy the most because it creates the same purification as having done many hundreds of thousands of prostrations, Vajrasattva mantras, mandala offerings, and so forth. It is most amazing.



WATCH THE VIDEO: DIFFICULTIES TO FOLLOW THE GURU'S ADVICE IS LIKE DOING HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF PROSTRATIONS

If we are following the guru's advice and get sick or experience problems, this is a very good sign because it means many, many eons of suffering in the lower realms are now being purified. Every second that we fulfill the guru's wishes and follow their advice, our negative karma is being burned up and we are collecting skies of good karma. How much purification happens and how much merit we collect depends entirely on how well we practice correctly following the virtuous friend.

Conversely, if we don't know the practice of correctly following the guru, we will create the heaviest negative karma every minute. If we disrespect our guru, it becomes disrespect to all the buddhas. After we decide to become a disciple of the guru, if we then belittle the guru, we cannot achieve enlightenment in this life, Rinpoche explains. As such, it is a very heavy negative karma that results in the worst suffering. Therefore, a serious practitioner makes their mind strong and does not allow anything to distract them. No matter what happens they remain determined to fulfill the guru's wishes and to follow the guru's advice in order to achieve enlightenment for all sentient beings. Correctly following the virtuous friend becomes the most important thing in one's life! This is why we must choose our guru very wisely.

To inspire us to correctly follow our guru, Rinpoche explains that by offering service to the guru, we receive more merit than if we were to make offerings to numberless buddhas, Dharma, and Sangha! Even a small gesture like offering a cup of water or a pair of shoes to the guru creates more merit than making offerings to numberless Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, and statues, stupas, and scriptures.

Also, by correctly following the guru, we create the cause to meet a qualified guru in this and *all* future lifetimes, and to receive the complete and unmistakable Dharma teachings from them. Every second we correctly follow the guru, we create the causes to receive a higher rebirth, and, ultimately, to put an end to the sufferings of samsara and achieve enlightenment. By depending on the guru, we can even achieve enlightenment in a brief lifetime of degenerate times. It is said that even the most foolish person can do this through strong and stable devotion. It is only our lazy mind that makes it difficult to follow the guru's advice, Rinpoche explains. But by seeing the guru as all the buddhas, and by remembering the guru's kindness, which is like the limitless sky, we become so happy to follow the advice because we see the incredible importance and the great benefits. So we must make good use of this opportunity!

WE CAN USE OUR PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH TO PURIFY NEGATIVE KARMA

Rinpoche explains that having this one-time opportunity makes us unbelievably fortunate—a perfect human rebirth is more precious than the whole sky filled with wish-granting jewels. This is because even skies of wish-granting jewels don't have the power to purify our negative karma and save us from the lower realms, nor can they give us liberation from samsara and enlightenment, but having a perfect human rebirth can do this.



**WATCH THE VIDEO:
PURIFY NOW
BECAUSE YOU CAN DIE
AT ANY TIME**

We have been creating negative karma from beginningless rebirths, which is why it is so important to do purification practices in this life—before our negative karma ripens. Once it ripens, there's nothing we can do; we must experience the result. Therefore, we need to do a purification practice every day. There are **many practices we can do for purification**, including Vajrasattva practice, prostrations to the Thirty-Five Confession Buddhas, and others. Although these formal purification practices are extremely effective in purifying our negative karma, Rinpoche explains that the most powerful thing we can do to purify our negative karma is to follow our guru's advice and

please our guru. But if we don't realize how valuable and important these practices are and that having a perfect human rebirth gives us the perfect opportunity to do them, we might think it is better to spend our time at the beach swimming in the water like a fish!

WE CAN USE OUR PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH TO TAKE VOWS

A human rebirth is also unbelievably precious because, in addition to merely avoiding the negative actions that result in troubles for us, we can use it to take and live in vows in order to abstain from negative actions. Without vows, not only are we in danger of wasting our life, but we may end up using it to create non-virtue, leading to long-term suffering for ourselves in the future. On the other hand, even keeping one of the five lay precepts brings so much happiness to ourselves and at the same time protects others from being harmed by us. And any vow we take with bodhichitta, such as the eight Mahayana precepts, benefits every single sentient being—not even one ant is left out.

WE CAN USE OUR PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH TO COLLECT EXTENSIVE MERIT

We can use every moment of our perfect human rebirth to collect extensive merit—the cause of all happiness including enlightenment. For example, just by putting our hands together in the mudra of prostration every time we see a holy object, we

LAMA ZOPA
RINPOCHE WITH A
DHARMA “FRIEND,”
KOPAN MONASTERY,
NOVEMBER 2020.
PHOTO BY VEN.
LOBSANG SHERAB.



create merit. Rinpoche explained the eight benefits of doing so, summed up in a verse he himself composed:

“Perfect body, surrounding people, morality, devotion,
Supreme brave mind, rebirth as a deva or human,
Achieve the arya path, and become enlightened.”

He also explained some of the benefits of doing full-length prostrations. For example, every time we prostrate, not only do we purify negative karmas and defilements collected from beginningless rebirths, we also create the good karma to be born as a wheel-turning king for one thousand lives, times the number of atoms covered by our body and even by our hair. By prostrating even with one hand in the mudra of prostration or bowing our head or body to a holy object, and even prostrating with a distracted mind, we create the cause to achieve supreme enlightenment.

In addition, a perfect human body is precious because we can use it to make offerings. Offering flowers to holy objects creates the cause to have a beautiful body while we are in samsara and to have a holy body that sentient beings never get bored of seeing when we become a buddha. Offering incense creates the cause to have pure morality from life to life. Offering light creates the cause to develop Dharma wisdom and become free from ignorance, to receive a beautiful body, and to become a buddha. Offering food creates the cause to have a long life, to possess many enjoyments, and to achieve immortality. Offering music creates the cause for millions of people to be attracted to the sound of our voice while we are still in samsara. In this way, we can influence them in a positive way. Offering music also creates the cause to achieve all the qualities of a buddha's holy speech.

Rinpoche points out that there is no difference at all between making offerings to an actual buddha and making offerings to statues or paintings of a buddha and to other holy objects. We should, therefore, take every chance we get to make offerings to holy objects.

WE CAN USE OUR PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH TO TEACH DHARMA TO SENTIENT BEINGS

While discussing how to make this perfect human rebirth meaningful, Rinpoche reminds us that we can use it to offer Dharma to sentient beings. This can involve as “little” as reciting a mantra one time to an animal such as a dog—even this is a priceless way to benefit others. Rinpoche quotes from several sutras, telling us, for example, that Buddha said that by giving one verse of Dharma to a sentient being with compassion, we collect more merit than that of offering buddha worlds equaling the number of grains of sands in the River Ganga filled with the seven types of jewels to the buddhas. Likewise, we create more merit than that of

offering a great-thousand-fold, that is, a billion, universes filled with gold to the buddhas. And what about teaching Dharma to two sentient beings? We get double that merit, Rinpoche says! So imagine the merit of those who constantly travel around the world giving teachings to many people. Wow!



**WATCH THE VIDEO:
YOUR PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH IS
INCREDIBLE BECAUSE YOU CAN USE IT
TO TEACH DHARMA**

WE CAN USE OUR PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH TO GENERATE THE FOUR IMMEASURABLE THOUGHTS

This perfect human rebirth is so precious because it can be used to practice the four immeasurable thoughts. The merit of practicing each of the four immeasurable thoughts—immeasurable equanimity, immeasurable loving kindness, immeasurable compassion, and immeasurable joy—is so huge that it doesn't fit in the sky. Rinpoche advises us to not just recite the words of the prayer for generating the four immeasurable thoughts—while thinking of eating pizza or going to the beach!—but to actually meditate on them. To illustrate the benefits of doing so, Rinpoche talks extensively about the benefits of generating immeasurable loving kindness. For example, *King of Concentration Sutra* says that the merit of generating loving kindness far exceeds the merit of making unimaginable offerings to all the supreme holy beings in ten million billion universes! Meditation on the four immeasurables combined with doing tonglen is especially amazing.



**WATCH THE VIDEO:
YOU GET SKIES OF MERITS
BY MEDITATING ON IMMEASURABLE
LOVING KINDNESS**

WE CAN USE OUR PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH TO OVERCOME SELF-CHERISHING

This perfect human rebirth is also so precious because we can use it to overcome our self-cherishing thought, our selfish mind, and generate loving kindness, compassion, and bodhichitta. This is much more meaningful than living our life under the control of delusions and causing harm to sentient beings. Usually when someone harms us, our solution is to harm them back, and because of this, we continuously receive harm. The self-cherishing thought that thinks, “I am most important, my happiness is most important,” is a total hallucination. It is like drinking poison while believing it is nectar and only causes us to harm ourselves and others.

The self-cherishing mind is also like a rock. We have to make it soft like cotton—full of loving-kindness and great compassion for others—which leads to bodhichitta.

In addition, the self-cherishing mind is like a dictator which only thinks about our own happiness and our own power. We don't want anyone to harm us or be displeased with us. Because of that, if someone harms, insults, or criticizes us, we get so upset because the self-cherishing mind didn't get what it wanted.

This self-cherishing is the real enemy because all of the suffering of samsara from beginningless rebirths up until now comes from thinking in this way. Together with self-grasping, it has prevented us from achieving even one realization of the path to enlightenment and from liberating even one single sentient being from samsara.

Living our life controlled by the self-cherishing thought, anger, attachment, and the root of samsara—the ignorance holding the I as real—has cheated us. We think of “me, me, me” and work only for ourselves, but all of our happiness comes from sentient beings. Also, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, in whom we take refuge, come from sentient beings. Therefore, we should see all sentient beings as dear and use this precious opportunity of a human life to abandon self-cherishing and strengthen the mind that cherishes others more than ourselves.

WE CAN USE OUR PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH TO LIVE LIFE WITH A GOOD HEART AND CHERISH OTHERS

It is so important to live our life with a good heart, not harming sentient beings and only benefiting them. First we come to realize that everyone's happiness is *as* important as our own; and next we come to realize that their happiness is *more* important than our own.

There are many benefits of using our precious human rebirth to cherish others. If we want happiness, it has to come from our mind, Rinpoche explains. Buddha defeated a million maras by meditating on loving-kindness. If we practice loving-kindness, if we practice bodhichitta, this is the best protection from life's dangers. If we don't want suffering—don't harm others!

If a person dedicates their life and offers service with a good heart to everyone, not in a forced way but happily and sincerely, then everything appears to that person as happy, everything appears as good. Therefore, it is also in our own self-interest to cherish others.

Generating loving kindness and compassion, and avoiding the self-cherishing mind is also unbelievably important for our health. With a good heart, we can achieve success for ourselves and others. We can cease all the wrong concepts and delusions, and achieve the realizations of the path to enlightenment.

WE CAN USE OUR PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH TO DEVELOP COMPASSION AND HELP OTHERS

By reflecting on our own samsara and realizing that we have experienced oceans of suffering from beginningless rebirths, we develop strong renunciation wishing to be free from it. When we also think that others are suffering in the same way, we develop compassion for them, wishing *them* to be free from suffering. While we are just one, they are numberless—and they suffer just like us. We can't imagine the different kinds of suffering that other beings experience. It is unbearable.

To generate compassion, we need to know the suffering of the six-realm sentient beings. For example, pretas, or hungry ghosts (a type of being), can't find food or drink for tens of thousands of years. Due to their karma, even if they see water, their gaze dries the water up and it disappears. If they look at a green plant, it becomes bare and wilted. One type of preta has a mouth the size of the eye of a needle, but a stomach as big as a mountain. Even if they find food or drink, it cannot fill their stomachs. A second type of preta has flames coming from its mouth, and a third type has knots in its neck. These pretas all have unimaginable, unbearable suffering. One practice Rinpoche does often is making charity to these pretas by combining the practice with Dzambala offering, utilizing the offered water for the pretas.

As human beings, we cannot stand even small problems and difficulties. But these hardships are nothing compared to those experienced by animals. They cannot express themselves, so there is no one to help them. In addition, human beings, from presidents and billionaires down to beggars, do not really comprehend the feelings of animals. We kill thousands of animals every day for food. People not only eat them, but also make money from killing them and selling their meat and other body parts including skin and fur. People have the mistaken view that this is a good thing, that there is nothing wrong with it, that these beings are there for our pleasure. They never think about the suffering of the animals and that they also want happiness. They don't realize that these beings, who have been their mother's numberless times, are objects of compassion, not simply objects of pleasure.

We, therefore, need to develop compassion for animals and help them. There are many ways to benefit animals, who may suffer in the animal realm not just for this one lifetime, but for many eons. In his teachings, Rinpoche offers examples of how to cherish *all* sentient beings, including even the tiniest (and most irritating!) among us, such as mosquitoes. Some ideas of ways to benefit them include offering them blessed water or food, reciting prayers and mantras to them, playing sutras for them to hear, taking them around holy objects, and so forth. We can also build holy objects that animals can circumambulate to collect merit.



WATCH THE VIDEO: HOW TO HELP SENTIENT BEINGS SAY GOODBYE TO SUFFERING

Wherever we go we can benefit sentient beings. For example, when we go to the beach, we can benefit all the animals in the ocean by dedicating our merits for them to never again be reborn in the lower realms and to be free from physical and mental sufferings, and for all of their wishes to succeed according to holy Dharma. Also, while at the beach, we can pray for human beings, wishing that anyone who even hears about the beach, sees the beach, or remembers the beach be free from all suffering and achieve all happiness, including enlightenment.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE USE OUR PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH TO HARM OURSELVES AND OTHERS

When we harm others, we create the cause to be harmed by them. Rinpoche explains we also will experience the result of torment in the lower realms, which could last for eons! This is not just from harming human beings, but also when, for our own pleasure, we kill and eat animals. When we use others for our own happiness, we will experience the result of being used by others in the future. However, if we cherish others with a bodhichitta motivation and think of only their happiness, we create the cause for happiness and we become a leader in this life or the next life for our country and the world; we lead others in Dharma, we lead them to happiness, to enlightenment. We are so fortunate to be able to open our minds to understanding karma.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE USE OUR PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH TO GENERATE JEALOUSY

Jealousy harms our own mind and this can also lead to harming others. When we are very attached to someone, we become jealous if someone is kind to them. Jealousy makes us crazy. Jealousy even causes us to experience hell, while still in a human body. Particularly with those we are in a physical relationship with, the suffering of jealousy can cause our mind to completely freak out. When our partner even smiles at someone else or gives someone else some attention, we can become crazy with jealousy and want to destroy the other person. Many murders and other acts of violence occur due to jealousy, which comes from cherishing the I. It causes huge suffering in our life.

When we have self-cherishing, we think our happiness is more important than that of the numberless other sentient beings. However, there is no logical reason to think this. The antidote to jealousy is to rejoice in others' happiness. If we rejoice whenever we see something good happen to other people, our life

becomes very healthy, not neurotic. When we don't feel jealousy, our mind becomes free.

We should therefore, rejoice, thinking, for example, "Everyone needs happiness, as I need it. How wonderful it is that my partner received happiness from that other person." Likewise, when we see others buying nice things, living in nice environments, or enjoying nice partners, we should rejoice rather than be jealous. We can think, "How wonderful it is that this person has happiness."

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE USE OUR PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH TO GENERATE ANGER

In all situations, first we discriminate "bad" and "good," and from that, anger and attachment arise. When we believe what our anger thinks, Rinpoche explains, we want to destroy our enemy. When we believe what attachment thinks, we get stuck on an object and believe that it is "soooo good." We will do anything to obtain it or hold onto it. In reality, there is nothing there; it is empty. The teachings on emptiness explain that everything is projected by our own mind. What anger believes, what attachment believes, is not really there. Both anger and attachment are built on the basis of a wrong view of the object. So there is nothing to be angry at and also nothing to be attached to.

Anger has many faults. For example, even in this very life it harms our health. Scientific research has found that people who have a temper—those who get angry often and easily—are more likely to die from a heart attack. Rinpoche explains, quoting His Holiness the Dalai Lama, that an angry and violent mind also destroys our immune system, and then we get sicknesses that don't have a cure. On the other hand, by practicing patience and overcoming anger, we look after our bodies and at the same time make our mind healthy. Therefore, even from the health side, understanding Dharma—learning it, practicing it, and meditating on it—is so important. It is so urgent!

But much worse than the effect it has on our health, even one second of anger destroys our merit, the cause of happiness. Every time we follow anger, we destroy our merit—and we might get angry many times a day! Anger blazes like a fire and completely burns our virtue, the seed of liberation. As a result, it causes us to be reborn in hell.

Since anger is the cause of hell, why don't we put a stop to it? We get so angry over small problems, which cause us eons of the heaviest suffering in samsara. So why don't we avert it? Even the greatest suffering in the human realm is nothing compared to the suffering of hell. As an example, Rinpoche explains that in the human realm even the suffering of 360 sharp spears penetrating our body is nothing compared to the smallest suffering in hell.

WE CAN USE OUR PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH TO PRACTICE PATIENCE

Happiness or problems are in our control, Rinpoche explains. It depends on whether we think in a positive or negative way. If we think in a negative way, mountains of problems arise, resulting in losing our appetite, not sleeping, and even committing suicide. To the contrary, if we avoid anger, there is no enemy in the world. So in that way, it is up to us whether or not we have enemies. To help us develop patience, Rinpoche offers several methods we can use to change our way of thinking to help us overcome our anger and remain patient when others treat us badly.

Instead of getting angry at a person for making mistakes, we can think that it is ignorance that is causing their actions. Instead of thinking, “That person is bad,” we can think, “I need to help that person, especially to reduce their ignorance.” We can also remember their kindness instead of focusing on their mistakes. Then we can have compassion for the person instead of anger.

When a mosquito is buzzing around us, or someone harms us, we can use this as an opportunity to examine whether or not we were really practicing Dharma when we recited many mantras and prayers and have done many retreats. For example, when someone is angry, scolding, or disrespecting us, we can see whether or not we are practicing Dharma by how much we can dedicate our merits for that person. We can also check whether our mind is kind and compassionate and we generate patience or forgiveness, or we get angry and want to harm them.

Rinpoche suggests that instead of getting angry at our present situation, which causes us to be reborn in hell and is the heaviest suffering in samsara, why don't we get angry at the anger? Our real enemy is the anger. The anger is not outside, not coming from those who harm us; it is in our mind. Do we want to be reborn in hell and suffer? The answer is no. What causes that is anger. So, logically, we must give up anger.



**WATCH THE VIDEO:
YOU CAN'T REPAY THE KINDNESS
OF YOUR ENEMY EVEN BY OFFERING
THEM THE WHOLE WORLD**

Obstacles, disturbing situations, undesirable conditions—all persuade us to practice virtue. Therefore we need to complete the paramita of patience to achieve enlightenment. Someone who treats us badly is our practical teacher of patience, our practical guru of patience. Only the sentient beings who harm us and get angry at us, the ones we call “enemy,” actually help us to practice the paramita of patience and put into practice the teachings we have received. By practicing patience we can overcome anger and not only achieve liberation from samsara, but achieve

enlightenment, the infinite qualities of the holy body, speech, and mind of a Buddha, with which we can do perfect work for sentient beings. By thinking in this way, we can see that this person who is our “enemy” is actually unbelievably kind and incredibly precious in that they help us to achieve enlightenment. How kind they are!

From our own side, we can practice rejoicing when someone harms us; but from the side of the other person, they should practice self-discipline. Because we are practicing rejoicing at the situation, it might look as though that other person can do whatever they wish, including harming us. Rinpoche clarifies, it is not like that. If their behavior is harming others, that person should stop doing it. However, while we can't control what someone else does, we can control what we do. By rejoicing and keeping a happy mind, our body and mind remain relaxed and comfortable. By practicing self-discipline and contentment, we can bring peace to the world rather than being like a firecracker—full of anger and jealousy.

WE CAN USE OUR PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH TO ACHIEVE ENLIGHTENMENT

Sentient beings are the source of all happiness and must be foremost in our thoughts and actions. If we value sentient beings above all else, we won't harm them and will also strive to benefit them. The best attitude to have, and the best way to live our life, is to take responsibility for sentient beings, including those that harm us. Having promised to benefit all sentient beings, for example, when we recite the verse of refuge and bodhichitta at the beginning of our practice or when we take the bodhisattva vows, we have to remember this promise in our daily life whenever sentient beings harm us. In that way, we will have no time to get angry back or have self-cherishing thoughts—instead, goodbye anger! Goodbye self-cherishing!

DON'T WASTE THIS PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH!

By using this human rebirth to practice bodhichitta and realize emptiness, we can achieve enlightenment and be able to free the numberless sentient beings from the oceans of samsaric sufferings and bring them to enlightenment. Rinpoche reminds us of the example of Milarepa—who didn't even have one rupee to his name, lived on nettles and water, and faced many hardships in his life while practicing Dharma, but he had a perfect human rebirth and then used it to achieve enlightenment. Rinpoche explains that if we have the will, perseverance, and patience, we too can definitely achieve enlightenment in one lifetime.

“So, you see, I have gone through many things that you can do with this precious human body,” Rinpoche says. “There is so much that you can do, even without talking about tantra, but just about the general subject of how to achieve enlightenment quickly.”

This perfect human rebirth provides incredible opportunities to benefit numberless sentient beings. Therefore, we should not waste our human body, Rinpoche implores us. Make this life meaningful. Use it to actualize the lamrim. Use it to achieve enlightenment so as to be able to cause every single transmigratory being to achieve liberation and the state of omniscience. There is no time to waste and death can come at any time.

Death and Impermanence

Rinpoche has discussed the subject of death and impermanence at length in this teaching series. Like the topic of the perfect human rebirth, this is an important preliminary subject, the contemplation of which prepares us to be able to practice thought transformation.

Rinpoche is adamant that the subject of death and impermanence should not be ignored:

“The suffering of death is something you don’t want to hear about! You don’t want to think about it! In the West, people always distract themselves and instead of thinking about death, think about something else. But then when death comes, we have to experience it. We have to go through it. But until we are actually dying, we distract ourselves and avoid thinking about it. Of course, if someone hasn’t met Dharma, to think of death is of no use. It only brings fear. They don’t have a method to make preparations for death, and they don’t know what to do at death time. So they ignore it. Then, when death comes, it’s too late. It’s finished. Then they just have to accept it. Wow.”

BY NOT REMEMBERING DEATH, WE WASTE OUR PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH

Rinpoche explains that all the teachings of the Buddha are to subdue our minds. However, for the teachings to do that, we first need to meditate on impermanence and death. Without remembering impermanence and death we will listen to teachings, such as those on lojong, and even think that they are nice, but we won’t put them into practice. Instead we will put them away in a box, intending to keep them for later. But because we have no idea when we are actually going to die (and indeed we are running toward death all the time), we don’t have the luxury of waiting until we are old to start practicing. The time is now.



**WATCH THE VIDEO:
WITHOUT REMEMBERING DEATH
AND IMPERMANENCE YOU WON’T
PRACTICE LOJONG**

Unlike other subjects in Buddhism, the subject of death and impermanence is easy to understand but at the same time it is

incredibly important! We must think about it from the depths of our hearts because without continually remembering death and impermanence we won’t achieve realizations and complete the path to enlightenment.

When we don’t think of death, our mind becomes totally distracted by the outside five sense objects, the pleasures of this life, as well as by our friends and enemies. All of our hard work is for this life’s happiness only, and nothing we do becomes holy Dharma. All the mistakes we make, especially in terms of wasting our life, happen due to not having an awareness of death and impermanence. As long as we are still clinging to the happiness of this life, we won’t practice holy Dharma. Our actions become only worldly dharma, non-virtue. Giving up the attachment clinging to the happiness of this life is the very first Dharma practice. This is achieved by remembering death and impermanence.

If we think of our death—if we remember that our death can happen this year, this month, this week, even today—it brings our mind inside, and we examine our own life. We come to realize that there is no point in being attached to our wealth and other objects of desire. Since we have to leave everything behind, why be attached to dream-like objects of desire?

Since beginningless rebirths we have been harming others due to attachment and desire. Our mind has cheated us by following attachment and by using everything, including our body, merits, possessions, and other people, in the wrong way—to create suffering instead of happiness. But remembering death stops the delusions—such as anger, attachment, ignorance, and self-cherishing—from arising and stops us from engaging in negative karma.

At the time of death, there is no more time to think about and transform our minds. When our whole life has been under the control of the self-cherishing thought and attachment to this life, at the time of death we will see that we have not only wasted this precious human life, but our actions have been negative. Therefore, thinking about death and being afraid of the suffering in samsara is so useful to a Dharma practitioner. It makes us practice Dharma sincerely in order to become free from the oceans of samsaric sufferings and lower nirvana, and to achieve great nirvana, or enlightenment, in order to be able to free the numberless sentient beings from the oceans of samsaric sufferings and bring them to enlightenment.

MEDITATING ON DEATH AND IMPERMANENCE REMINDS US TO USE OUR PERFECT HUMAN REBIRTH RIGHT NOW!

Rinpoche explains that meditating on death and impermanence is what controls and subdues our mind. He reminds us of the important points about death to remember and meditate on.

Death is definite. Everyone who is alive now will one day be dead. We are all in the process of dying. From the moment we are born, we are constantly running toward death. In the morning we

could be involved in conversations and other activities, and by the evening we could be dead. This includes famous people and holy beings—all beings who are living now, at some point in the future will no longer be here, just their names will remain. But while we continuously see people around us dying of cancer, or currently from this virus, we never relate it to ourselves—we never think, “Just like them, I’m going to die.” To make sure that we don’t take our life for granted and waste it, therefore we need to remember how death is definite, thinking, “Sooner or later, I too will not be here.”

Although death is definite, the time of our death is uncertain. We are unbelievably fortunate to still be alive today. So many people died last night, but we are still alive. Although we can die at anytime, the best thing to think is that we could die today or, at most, we could die tomorrow. In this way, we will use every moment we have left to practice Dharma.

At the time of death nothing can benefit us other than Dharma. The family and friends that we love can’t come with us, nor can our wealth or possessions—not even our precious body that we cherish so much. We can’t carry even one atom with us. It is only our practice of the holy Dharma that can benefit us at the time of death, nothing else.



**WATCH THE VIDEO:
BY REMEMBERING IMPERMANENCE-
DEATH, EVERYTHING YOU DO BECOMES
HOLY DHARMA**

Remembering death and impermanence encourages us to practice *right now*. There is no time to waste. We don’t think about death to develop a fear of dying; we do it to encourage ourselves to practice Dharma without delay, to not put it off until we get old. By continually being aware of death and practicing Dharma, the best Dharma practitioners are able to die happy, the middling ones are able to die without sadness, and even the poorest ones are able to die without regret, Rinpoche explains.

“Among all the things to remember, the best is remembering impermanence-death. It reminds you to practice Dharma. Not just to practice Dharma in this life, but to practice Dharma—since when death will occur is not definite,” Lama Zopa Rinpoche advises.

**BY REMEMBERING DEATH AND
IMPERMANENCE, WE GIVE UP OUR
ATTACHMENT TO SAMBARIC PLEASURES**

Throughout his thought transformation teachings, Rinpoche emphasizes that this virus is only one of the many shortcomings of samsara. We say to one another, “I hope you are well,” but, in reality, while we are in samsara there is no way to be well; we are always experiencing suffering.

“I used to think that when people ask me, ‘How are you?’ that as long as I am not liberated from samsara, how can I be well? Because our body and mind are under the control of delusion and karma, they are suffering in nature, so how can we be well? So usually saying, ‘I’m well,’ is according to the view of the hallucinated mind,” Rinpoche explains.

Samsara is in the nature of suffering, and when we understand this, naturally we will want to be free from it. By stopping our attachment to the happiness of this and future lives, we are able to transform our mind into the pure thought of renunciation. Remembering death and impermanence helps us remember that this life is nothing to be attached to, we can’t bring the pleasures of this life with us when we die.

But what exactly is samsara? It is the association of a body and mind that takes rebirth under the control of karma and delusions. Samsara, which means “circling” in English, is not a place—it is not a city or the mountains—nor is it a thing, such as cars or technology. It is our very own suffering body and deluded mind. We have been experiencing the six-realm sufferings since beginningless rebirths. Whatever suffering we see—of insects, animals, or people—we have gone through it *numberless times* but we don’t remember it. Just like we don’t even remember what we ate or said yesterday, we can’t remember our previous rebirths due to the pollution of ignorance. We have been doing the same thing, on and on and on—nothing new!—from beginningless rebirths. That is why up until now we still haven’t become free from samsara.

Suffering comes from the three poisonous minds: attachment, anger, and ignorance. However, the root of our samsara is the specific ignorance that holds the I to exist from its own side. Neither God or Buddha created samsara. Our own ignorance is the cause. In reality, from beginningless rebirths the I has never existed from its own side; it has always existed in mere name. How it exists is unbelievably subtle. Compared to the “real I” that appears to us and we have believed in from beginningless rebirths, compared to *that*, it is as if the I doesn’t exist at all. Our mind has been creating a superstition, a wrong belief. With that wrong concept of I at the root, we create the oceans of samsaric sufferings: the oceans of hell sufferings, oceans of hungry ghost sufferings, oceans of animal sufferings, oceans of human being suffering, oceans of sura and asura suffering, and oceans of intermediate state being suffering. This wrong concept is the cause of all that suffering!

Those who have renunciation see that being in samsara is like being in a prison, like sitting naked on a thorn bush, or like being one with fire. But we don’t recognize that; instead we try to enjoy this big hallucination and we completely forget about death and impermanence. Only when there are problems do we seek something else. And until we meet Dharma, we don’t even know

what else to try to solve our problems. Whatever we do is only suffering. Wherever we live there is suffering.

Human beings experience the sufferings of birth, sickness, old age, and death, and the sufferings of not finding desirable objects, meeting with undesirable objects, and losing desirable objects. These evident forms of suffering are all called “the suffering of pain.”

Whatever we enjoy is also suffering. Samsaric pleasures are themselves in the nature of suffering; they are the “suffering of change.” This is the stopping of a big suffering and the beginning of a small suffering, initially unnoticeable, that we label “pleasure.” For example, on a hot day, diving into cool water initially feels like real pleasure but, as we stay in the water, we gradually become cold and want to return to the warm sunshine on the beach.

Because samsaric pleasures are in the nature of suffering, they cannot grow, cannot last, and cannot be completed. They are like honey on a razor blade. We lick the honey and experience the sweetness, yes, but then the blade cuts our tongue. We are hallucinated by samsaric pleasures like moths are attracted to a flame, but samsaric pleasures never last and doesn't bring real satisfaction.

On the other hand, Dharma happiness, happiness that comes from renunciation, bodhichitta, and the wisdom realizing emptiness (without even talking about tantra)—that happiness can develop. When we achieve enlightenment, we have completed the happiness of Dharma. We can't do that with samsaric happiness. So we need to analyze and understand that what we label “pleasure” comes from our mind and is in fact suffering.

These first two sufferings—the suffering of pain and the suffering of change—come from the third: pervasive compounding suffering. This suffering refers to the aggregates being completely under the control of delusion and karma, so they are pervaded by suffering and contaminated by the seed of delusion and karma. The way to generate renunciation is to renounce this pervasive compounding suffering. With this suffering, there's no freedom at all—we have not been free from suffering *even for a second* from beginningless rebirths. Every moment is contaminated by the seed of delusion and karma. Then again it happens—from the seed, delusion arises, then we create karma, and from this karma, the suffering of pain and suffering of change arise again, and again.

Attachment to the pleasures of this life not only makes our life meaningless, it also makes us create negative karma. Since beginningless rebirths we have been following attachment; that's how strong the habit is. For example, our attachment to others' bodies is due to habituation from beginningless samsara with the thought that others' bodies are attractive. The attachment does not come from the side of the object, but comes from our mind. Depending on how someone treats us, our mind changes in regard to them. We discriminate people we like and don't like based on whether they love and praise us or criticize and harm us.

All of that is happening from our side. Beautiful and ugly come from our mind, not from the side of the object.



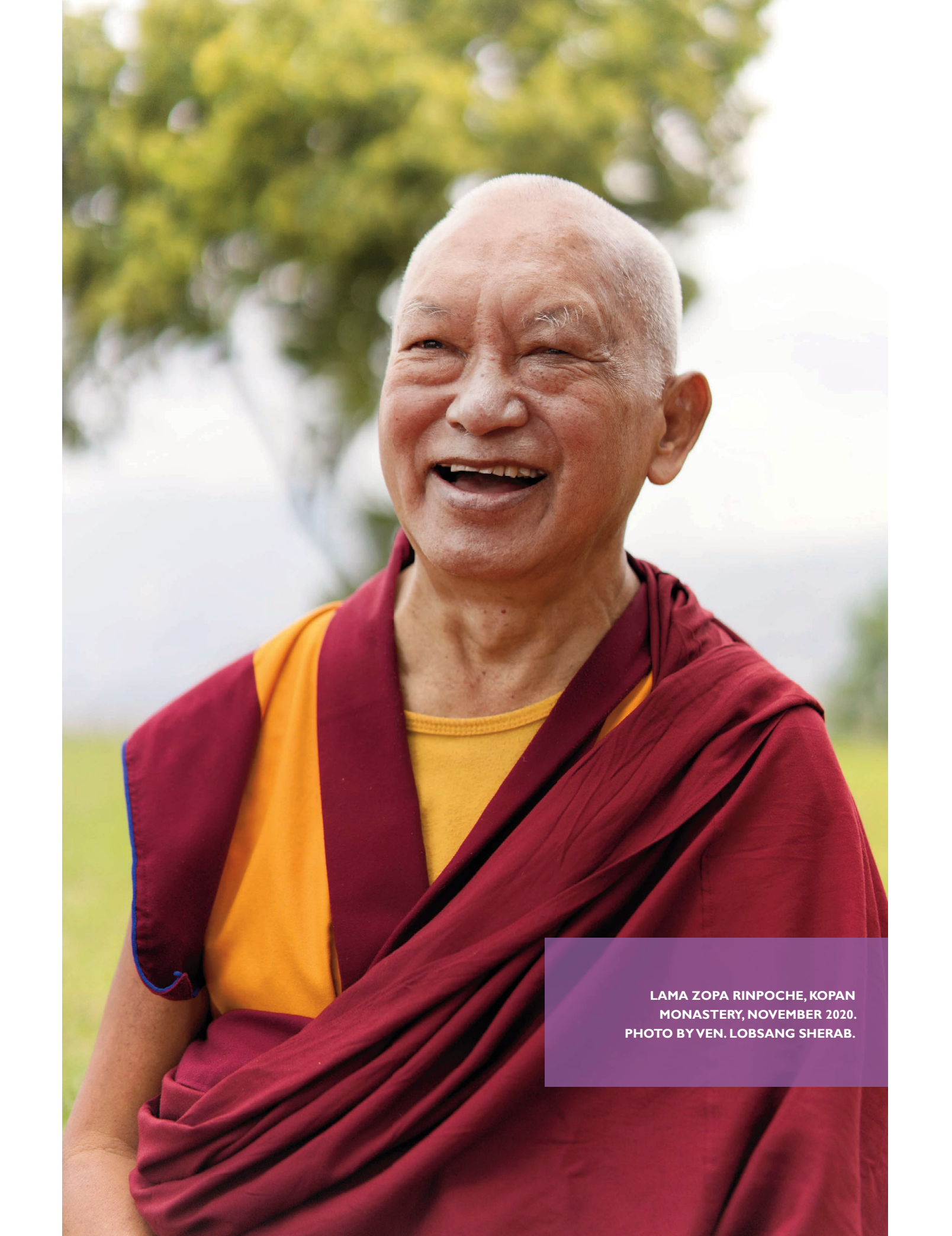
WATCH THE VIDEO: BEAUTY COMES FROM YOUR MIND

We can go crazy with attachment to people's bodies because we never think about what is inside: the veins, bones, and flesh—all are in the nature of death and impermanence. Even the outer skin is nothing to be attached to, if you look closely at it. In reality, Rinpoche says, the human body is just like meat in a shop in India or Nepal, where the bodies of animals are seen hanging from the ceiling with everything normally hidden under the skin fully visible.

By being attached to the pleasures of this life we give up a higher rebirth, nirvana, and enlightenment. We also give up the opportunity to bring numberless sentient beings to enlightenment, just for a few seconds of pleasure. We ourselves created attachment, therefore freedom from it is in our hands. It is important to meditate on the suffering of change to overcome attachment. What we call “pleasure” is labeled by our mind. The negative imprint left on our mental continuum by ignorance projects real pleasure and then real pleasure appears to us. Then, from this wrong concept, believing it to be real pleasure causes us to be attached to it. Due to this attachment, we are continuously reborn in samsara. Truly existent pleasure is a total hallucination, like taking drugs and then seeing things that aren't there.

In this life we are responsible for our future lives' happiness and suffering. To eliminate the suffering of future lives we have to stop running toward whatever we think is the best pleasure and following desire—without thinking of our future lives' happiness, liberation from samsara, and enlightenment. Desire and craving for pleasure binds us in samsara and from beginningless rebirths we have been following them. In this way, our attachment and desire have cheated us. Samsaric pleasures cause us to be reborn into the oceans of samsaric suffering again and again.

If we think all the time that we want to be happy, that we want to be comfortable, we won't find happiness. However, when we think that we don't need anything, our mind becomes free and peaceful. When we avert thoughts of desire, then happiness starts. Since beginningless rebirths, we have been trying to get samsaric enjoyments but we are still suffering. If we really want happiness, then we must completely abandon desire. As long as we follow desire, we will never get satisfaction, only suffering. The most important thing to know is this: Less desire means more happiness. Otherwise, our Dharma practice doesn't become real Dharma. We cheat ourselves if we don't renounce the world.



LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE, KOPAN
MONASTERY, NOVEMBER 2020.
PHOTO BY VEN. LOBSANG SHERAB.

Remembering death and impermanence helps us to see the immense value in renunciation. We must practice it before it is too late.

As Padmasambhava explains, appearances are like last night's dream, desire enjoyments are like an illusory party, and meaningless activities are like ripples on water. There is no happiness to enjoy in future lives from doing activities for the pleasure of this life alone. And while we are distracted by worldly concerns, death will come. Since we have to leave everything behind, it is illogical to be attached to the things of this life.

Everything that belongs to us will be left behind at the time of our death.

By training our mind in remembering death and impermanence, we can avert our attraction to the appearances of this life. When we no longer believe in the perfections of this life, we have generated renunciation of samsara. When we no longer want to be in samsara, all our actions of body, speech, and mind—not only listening, reflecting, and meditating—become a cause for liberation from samsara.

LIVING LIFE WITH BODHICHITTA

Bodhichitta is a Sanskrit word meaning, “the mind of enlightenment.” It is the wish to achieve enlightenment in order to lead all other beings into that same state. It is the attitude of the bodhisattva, of the person who makes the compassionate vow to save all others from suffering. For a bodhisattva, even being born in hell and experiencing suffering there for one sentient being is the greatest pleasure, like that of a swan diving into a cool pond.

The real purpose of our life is to benefit others: to free them from the oceans of samsaric suffering and to bring them to enlightenment. To do this, we ourselves need to achieve enlightenment. To achieve enlightenment, we need to generate bodhichitta. For this reason, according to Rinpoche, the very best thing to do is to generate bodhichitta and to live our life with bodhichitta. Anything we do with the ultimate good heart, bodhichitta, makes for the best and most meaningful life.



**WATCH THE VIDEO:
WHEN YOU GENERATE
BODHICHITTA IT IS FOR EVERYONE
YOU SEE!**

Even if someone doesn't have bodhichitta, if they have a good heart for everyone—including animals, insects, and people, without discrimination based on color, nationality, and so forth—that person makes everyone happy wherever they go, and everyone loves them.

With bodhichitta, no one is left out, not even the tiniest insect, such as an ant or mosquito. Friends, enemies, and strangers are included as well as the hell beings, preta beings, hungry ghosts, animals, asura beings, and sura beings in the numberless universes. There is nothing better than bodhichitta. It is the happiest life.

Rinpoche explains that the best way to gain the trust of others, and even to become a virtuous friend to sentient beings, is by developing the bodhichitta realization. To do this, we must learn and reflect on the bodhichitta teachings. At first, when we generate a bodhichitta motivation, it won't be real, meaning it won't be fully felt in the heart. It will have to be cultivated through

effortful meditation such as contemplating on the suffering of sentient beings. However, through training our mind, this meditation eventually leads to effortless bodhichitta—the actual realization. A person who generates a realization of bodhichitta, or even a fabricated motivation of bodhichitta, is most lucky.

To generate real bodhichitta, we need to have strong renunciation, the determination to put an end to our own samsaric suffering. With full renunciation of the three kinds of suffering (suffering of pain, suffering of change, and pervasive compounding suffering) comes great compassion for the suffering of others. We see sentient beings' suffering as if they have fallen into a red-hot fire. The more compassion and bodhichitta we have, the happier we are to take responsibility for freeing others from the oceans of samsaric suffering and bringing them to enlightenment.

According to Rinpoche, there is “no end” to the merit we create by generating bodhichitta in each action. We can turn every action into a cause of enlightenment if we engage in it with a bodhichitta motivation by cultivating the thought of cherishing others. When we actualize bodhichitta, we don't do a single activity with the motivation of cherishing ourselves; everything is done for every other being, for the numberless beings in the numberless universes. By the power of their strong bodhichitta, when bodhisattvas engage in any of the seven non-virtues of body and speech (killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, telling lies, slandering, speaking harshly, and gossiping), it actually becomes virtue and a cause for enlightenment.

Even when we are happy, comfortable, and enjoying life, if we remember bodhichitta, our happiness becomes a cause of enlightenment—a cause of happiness for sentient beings—and it doesn't get wasted. If we enjoy our comfort and happiness without bodhichitta, then it is just wasted and creates non-virtue, exhausting our merit. When we are suffering, including when we are dying, and also when we are enjoying life, we should try to remember bodhichitta and utilize whatever we are experiencing on the path to enlightenment for sentient beings. Without bodhichitta, even if we gain much knowledge and engage in highly advanced practices, we cannot achieve enlightenment. The main practice in our life, Rinpoche stresses again and again, should be bodhichitta.

UNDERSTANDING EMPTINESS IS THE BASIS FOR PRACTICING THOUGHT TRANSFORMATION

However much suffering there is in the world,
The root of all that is ignorance.
By realizing [emptiness], ignorance is stopped.
Therefore, the Buddha has taught dependent arising.
—*Praise to the Buddha for Revealing Dependent Arising*,
Lama Tsongkhapa

Starting at video 75 in this thought transformation series, Rinpoche begins offering us teachings on emptiness, in particular referring to Phabongkha Rinpoche's commentary on Lama Tsongkhapa's *Three Principal Aspects of the Path* and his lamrim text *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*. Rinpoche engages in this extensive explanation of emptiness because understanding emptiness is a basis for practicing thought transformation.

Buddha revealed how to realize emptiness. Rinpoche explains that we collect great merit by listening to teachings on emptiness and meditating on emptiness, as well as by teaching emptiness to others. Even if we only just begin to doubt that things exist from their own side and think that things might be empty—this already shakes our samsara.

To have even a little faith in the teachings on emptiness is so fortunate, Rinpoche explains. And if we have faith in the *Vajra Cutter Sutra* or other *Prajnaparamita* (perfection of wisdom) texts, we collect more merit than making charity of our own body! By writing these texts, reading them, memorizing them, and keeping them, we create inconceivable merit and the karma to actualize the meaning and reveal it to others, which creates even more inconceivable merit.

All the sufferings in the world, Rinpoche explains, including depression, comes from the ignorance that believes that the I exists from its own side, that the I is not “empty.” Since beginningless rebirths, our hallucinated mind has had this mistaken belief. Meditation on emptiness frees us from the oceans of samsaric suffering by eradicating the root of samsara, which is the ignorance that holds the I as real. To do this, we first need to understand how the I comes to appear and be believed as real.

In many of the teachings, Rinpoche focuses on the first vital point of the analysis of the four vital points, which is an analytical meditation on emptiness. The first point is recognizing the object to be refuted, or *gag ja* in Tibetan. Over several teachings, Rinpoche provides an overview of how this “false I,” the object to be refuted, appears according to the four main Buddhist philosophical schools. This overview concludes with a recognition that the Madhyamika Prasangika view is the most correct view.

When we recognize the Prasangika's extremely subtle object to be refuted in meditation—when we recognize that what we thought existed from its own side is false—the object to be refuted, which we hold so tightly on to, doesn't go anywhere, we simply recognize that it is not there *at all*. We come to realize that what we thought of as the real I is merely labeled by the mind and does not truly exist. It does not exist from its own side. It is not real.

So, what appears and what we believe, in reality, is not there. If we look for the I, from the top of our head all the way down to our toes, we won't find it in our body or in our mind, nor in our five aggregates all together. If we analyze it, we will find that how we think of the I is a big hallucination. When we cannot find the real I, we will realize how we have lived our lives with a false understanding of how we exist.

Rinpoche says that the biggest shock, the biggest unveiling of ignorance, is realizing that this I, which we cherish more than everyone else, actually doesn't exist even in the slightest! For lower intelligence beings, this recognition is a huge shock because they have been believing this wrong view since beginningless rebirths. For higher intelligence bodhisattvas, it brings such joy that tears of unbelievable happiness come to their eyes and their body hair stands on end.

How the I exists is so extremely subtle that it is almost as if it doesn't exist at all. But it does exist—as a dependent arising. If we meditate well on dependent arising, our realization of emptiness will be correct, otherwise it will not. While everything that exists is merely labeled by the mind on a valid base, many meditators, those who don't have the karma and extensive merit to realize this, fall into nihilism and think that nothing exists at all. This is a dangerous mistaken view that arises due to not understanding the meaning of dependent arising.

Rinpoche warns that even if we have an experience of understanding how things truly exist, if we don't continue to meditate on emptiness and stabilize our realization, then outside objects will once again come to control our mind and the experience will go away. And then we can't cope when our life changes. We aren't able to practice Dharma, we aren't able to control our mind, and instead outside objects control us. The clouds of delusions come, and there is so much suffering.

The wisdom realizing that the I is empty of existing from its own side eradicates the ignorance that is the root of samsara. All of our suffering comes from this wrong concept. It comes from our own mind, not from the outside.



SUNRISE FROM THE TOP OF THE KOPAN
MONASTERY GOMPA, DECEMBER 2020. PHOTO BY
VEN. LOBSANG SHERAB.

A worldly person can have so much education and understanding of science, but seeing the truth of I is so rare. Rinpoche explains that it is so unbelievably subtle that one needs to meditate to see it. This is the most important subject to check and to understand because all suffering comes from the ignorance that believes in a real I. To make sure we are clear on this point, Rinpoche explains that holding the I as real and most precious is “the most frightening garbage.”

“By cherishing the I as most precious, you have harmed numberless sentient beings in the past, you harm numberless sentient beings now, and you will harm numberless sentient beings in the future. Not only that, you suffer,” Rinpoche says. “Cherishing the I is worse than kaka. Kaka didn’t cause you to suffer from beginningless rebirths.”

THE CONTINUATION OF THESE TEACHINGS

Here we have introduced you to some of the important topics Lama Zopa Rinpoche has been focusing on in this teaching series so far. Again, we encourage you to engage with as many videos and transcripts as you are able to in order to receive the full impact of Rinpoche’s unique teachings and to investigate all of the topics Rinpoche is emphasizing. While we cannot predict exactly where Rinpoche is heading with this series, we will continue to deliver the teachings, videos, transcripts, and teaching summaries to you through blogs and social media as they happen.

Please join us in rejoicing in this most precious opportunity that we have to practice *RIGHT NOW* due to Rinpoche’s skillful urging. May we have the courage to take Rinpoche’s advice to heart and use life’s trials and difficulties, as well as its pleasures and successes, in the most meaningful way we are able to—to transform all that is experienced into the path to enlightenment, for the benefit of every single sentient being.

Written by Carina Rumrill based on the videos, transcripts, and previous summaries of Lama Zopa Rinpoche’s *Thought Transformation Teachings during the Time of COVID-19* series from March–November, 2020. Edited by Ven. Joan Nicell and Laura Miller.